

”John McDowell”

- On Quietism, Nonconceptual Content, and Semantics



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Abstract

In *Mind and World* John McDowell proposes to exorcise ‘some characteristic anxieties of modern philosophy’ that make the relation between mind and world seem problematic. According to McDowell, we are confronted by two strong but contrary intuitions when it comes to explaining the relation between mind and world. On the one hand, we are faced with a coherentism that threatens to leave the mind out of touch with the world, and on the other, we are confronted with the intuition that justification for our beliefs is simply *given* in experience. However, although McDowell’s book has been at the centre of philosophical discussion since its publication in 1994, there are aspects of his philosophy that seems difficult to fit together, and which, even today, poses challenges for even the most sympathetic reader. How are we to reconcile McDowell’s interesting suggestion that experience is already conceptual, thereby exorcising the apparent problem of mind’s relation to the world, with his quietism? And what *is* McDowell committed to with his claim that the content of our experience is conceptual? I discuss the first of these questions in essay I, whereas the second – what McDowell takes the debate on nonconceptual content to be about – is addressed in the second essay, distinguishing it from other conceptions in play in an increasingly ramified debate. However, the question that governs McDowell’s inquiry in *Mind and World* – how the mind is related to the world – is not a new question to McDowell, but runs like a red thread through his philosophical career. In *Mind and World* the question is addressed primarily in its specific epistemological variant, ‘how can experience justify beliefs?’, but the question of mind’s relation to the world also crops up in his earlier works on semantics. In some of these early, influential articles on semantics, McDowell queries the relation between mind and world by asking how there can be *de re* senses. My third essay takes a look at McDowell’s reading of Frege and Russell, and how it can be said to constitute an alternative way of dispelling the problems posed by the opposing intuitions, represented by coherentism and the Myth of the Given, in explaining the relation between mind and world.

Preface

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Introduction

In *Mind and World* John McDowell sets out to explain how we can avoid being worried about a defining problem of modern philosophy, a problem that, in spite of its age, appears to persist unabatedly in contemporary philosophy of mind, namely: how can our minds be related to the world? In its epistemological variant, the problem arises out of a dualism, which McDowell, following Donald Davidson, describes as a dualism of conceptual scheme and content, or, in his preferred phrasing, scheme and Given. In brief, the dualism presents us with the following predicament: in thinking about the relation between minds and world we seem faced with a pair of contradictory thoughts; on the one hand, it appears that our experiences must be able to justify our beliefs if we are to claim that the content of our thought is related to the world, and on the other, we are faced with the equally persistent thought that it is simply *impossible* for experience to stand in a justificatory relation to our beliefs. Fully developed, as McDowell says, the combination of these two intuitions about mind's relation to the world represents an antinomy; two lines of thought that cannot be made to cohere. However, as long as the incompatibility of these two thoughts remains inexplicit in one's thinking, "one [will] find oneself asking: "How is it possible for there to be thinking directed at how things are?"¹ One will, in other words, persist in trying to *answer* the question, to bring an end to this 'intolerable oscillation', or endless 'seesaw' between the two horns of the dualism, which, whose background, "if made explicit, would purport to reveal that the question's topic is actually not possible at all."² Rather than embarking on the futile project of attempting to answer this unsolvable oscillation McDowell seeks therefore to undermine the common conception of mindedness-in-nature shared by both intuitions which makes the problem seem pressing, and in so doing, unmask the dualism as nothing but an illusion that can be done away with. As he says, "If we can achieve a way of seeing things in which there is after all no tension there, the question, taken as a way of

¹ McDowell 1996: xiii.

² McDowell 1996: xiii.

expressing that philosophical puzzlement, should lapse; that needs to be distinguished from its seeming to have been answered.”³

That is not to say that we can easily free ourselves from the seemingly mandatory thoughts driving the oscillation: the intuitions on both sides are strong, and McDowell wants “to respect the conviction that the obligations are genuine, even while we see how we can, for our own part, reject the appearance that we are facing a pressing intellectual task.”⁴ Rather than dismissing the dualism out of hand, therefore, the unstable conundrum presents the backdrop to which the whole book develops – as an illusory problem, whose proper understanding would make visible a way out – and McDowell returns to it repeatedly throughout the lectures of *Mind and World* in framing his discussion on the relation between mind and world. A basic understanding of the motivating problem seems therefore essential in coming to grips with how McDowell thinks we can avoid being caught up in a fruitless oscillation between the two horns of this dualism, and in the ensuing section of my introduction I seek to provide a sketch of the dilemma as it is set out in that work.

In *Mind and World* McDowell probes a specific epistemological *version* of the question of how the mind is related to the world, but that must not lead us astray in equating his overall aim with that specific epistemological phrasing of the problem. McDowell finds dualisms at many levels of our thinking, species of a generic question that seeks to answer how our thought can have objective content, or, as McDowell says, “how [it can be] that exercises of a spontaneity bear on a reality outside the sphere of thinking at all.”⁵ Although it is only *through* the specifically epistemological, semantical etc. versions of the problem that we can address the more general worry, these species of the question must not be *equated* with the generic problem. It is vital that we do not let this distinction – and McDowell’s moving between them – escape us, if we are to understand his approach to the questions that preoccupies him. I briefly expound on the difference between the generic and the specific versions of the problem that occupies McDowell in a second section of this introduction, before rounding-off my introduction with a brief outline of the essays making up the body of this thesis.

³ McDowell 1996: xxi.

⁴ McDowell 1996: xi.

⁵ McDowell 1996: 15.

I. *The Dualism*

So how do we get a more substantial grasp on the problem facing us? In the later appended introduction to *Mind and World*, McDowell suggests that, "A good way into the picture I offer is to consider the plausibility of a minimal empiricism"⁶ – a thought, or intuition, which will constitute one of the horns in the dualism McDowell is about to draw up. The train of thoughts that coaxes us into a minimal empiricism gets started by noting, as McDowell does, that, "To make sense of the idea of a mental state's or episode's being directed towards the world, in the way in which, say, a belief or judgement is, we need to put the state or episode in a normative context."⁷ A belief or a judgement is directed towards the world in being 'stances' or 'postures' that are "correctly or incorrectly adopted according to whether or not things are indeed thus and so"⁸, as there would be no saying what the belief or judgement was a belief or judgement *about* unless it could be correctly or incorrectly adopted according to how things were in the world.⁹ And it seems similarly plausible to impose that requirement on all other content-bearing stances. As McDowell says, "If we could make sense of judgements or beliefs as directed towards the world in that way, other kinds of content-bearing postures or stances should easily fall into place."¹⁰

But this immediately gives rise to a related thought: as our access to the empirical world¹¹ goes through our experiences, it seems that the only way our thinking could be answerable to the world is for it to be answerable to *experience*. For, as McDowell says, invoking a Quineian jargon, how could a claim that our thinking is answerable to the empirical world be made sense of unless it meant answerable to the "tribunal of experience"; unless thought is correctly or incorrectly adopted according to *experience*? "This", as McDowell says, "is what I mean by a "minimal empiricism"; the idea that

⁶ McDowell 1996: xi.

⁷ McDowell 1996: xi.

⁸ McDowell 1996: xi. This is, of course, what is meant by placing something in a normative context.

⁹ As Barry Stroud says, in drawing up the dualism that makes up McDowell's starting point: "The troubling reflections start from the idea that thought has a subject-matter, or is about something, only if certain conditions are fulfilled. One such requirement is found in the idea of truth. A belief or judgement to the effect that things are thus and so is correctly or incorrectly held according to whether or not things are thus and so." (Stroud 2002: 79).

¹⁰ McDowell 1996: xii.

¹¹ "In addressing this question [i.e. how our thinking is answerable to the world], we might restrict our attention, at least tacitly, to thinking that is answerable to the *empirical* world; that is, answerable to how things are in so far as how things are is empirically accessible." (McDowell 1996: xii.)

experience must constitute a tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are, as it must be if we are to make sense of it as thinking at all.”¹² However, far from explaining how mind is related to the world, this thought merely instigates a suspicion, or an opposing thought, which, as soon as we think we have found peace in a minimal empiricism makes its presence known.

McDowell introduces this converse thought by considering a passage from Wilfrid Sellars, where Sellars draws up the distinction between placing an episode or state in a interconnected ‘space of reasons’, i.e., placing it in a “normative context [which] is necessary for the idea of being in touch with the world at all”¹³, and giving it an ‘empirical description’. In contrast to placing a thought in a normative space of reasons, giving a state or episode an empirical description is, as McDowell says, “to coin a phrase that is Sellarsian at least in spirit”¹⁴, to place something in the space of nature – or, as he immediately adds, to “situate it in the realm of law.”¹⁵ This, he remarks, makes Sellars conception of an empirical description come close to the way we think of explanations and descriptions employed in the natural sciences of today, but as he adds;

“what matters for Sellars’ point is not ... [the] positive characterisation [of the two ‘spaces’], but the negative claim: whatever the relations are that constitute the logical space of nature, they are *different in kind* from the normative relations that constitute the logical space of reasons. The relations that constitute the logical space of nature, on the relevant conception, do not include relations such as one thing’s being warranted, or – for the general case – correct, in the light of another. That is what Sellars is saying when he insists that “empirical description” cannot amount to placing something in the logical space of reasons.”¹⁶

But as McDowell says, if placing something in the space of nature, on Sellars’ understanding, is incompatible with taking part in the logical space of reasons, where in these two ‘spaces’ do we want to place experience?

The question brings out the force of the dualism, for if we choose to see experience in the terms employed by the modern sciences – as “impingements by the world on a

¹² McDowell 1996: xii.

¹³ McDowell 1996: xiv.

¹⁴ McDowell 1996: xiv.

¹⁵ McDowell 1996: xv.

¹⁶ McDowell 1996: xv.

possessor of sensory capacities”¹⁷, thereby locating it in the logical space of nature – we have excluded experience from the ‘space of reason’, which leaves it unable to act as justifications for our beliefs. But that was precisely what we required of experience in the first place in order for it to be able to put mind, or thought, in contact with the world. Minimal empiricism encouraged the thought that we could conceive of experience as a ‘tribunal, mediating the way our thinking is answerable to how things are’. But, as we have just seen, experience understood as impingements from nature does not have the normative character to endow thoughts with justification of how things are in the world – nature does not ‘include relations such as one thing being correct in the light of another’. Or, as Barry Stroud says in laying out McDowell’s dualism,

“to understand two things as connected in accordance with a law of nature is not to understand one of those things as making the other reasonable in any way, or as justifying or supporting it. It is to see that one thing happens because something else happens, but not to see that one thing is correctly or incorrectly executed, or is warranted or justified in the light of something else.”¹⁸

So as long as we choose to conceive experience under the heading of nature conceived as the realm of law, justification seems therefore ruled out. As McDowell concludes; “if we conceive experience as made up of impressions, on these principles it cannot serve as a tribunal, something to which empirical thinking is answerable.”¹⁹ This conclusion, however, is intolerable, and we are led back to reconsider whether brute experience cannot nevertheless, although it does not involve a normative context, yield justification for our beliefs – only to have it confirmed that the demand is absolute, and to find ourselves in the middle of the dreaded seesaw, oscillating back and forth between the two horns of the dualism.

The same considerations feature centrally in the first lectures of *Mind and World*, though in a different jargon. Here, McDowell puts the issue in Davidsonian or Kantian terms, describing the dualism, as was briefly noted above, as a dualism of conceptual scheme and content. The change of language does not alter the issue although it adds some points to the truncated version presented in the introduction, but more importantly:

¹⁷ McDowell 1996: xv.

¹⁸ Stroud 2002: 79-80.

¹⁹ McDowell 1996: xv.

in introducing the dualism here, in the main body of the book, McDowell starts from a different end of the problem; from an approach that immediately makes visible his favoured *dissolution* of the predicament facing us. Rather than beginning with the horns of the dualism, he sets out from the Kantian insight, which he seeks to put in their place²⁰ – that mind, or thought, is related to the world through our employment of concepts *in* experiencing. Or, in the Kantian language in which he often phrases that idea: “the fact that thoughts are not empty, the fact that thoughts have representational content, emerges out of an interplay of concepts and intuition.”²¹ From there, the Kantian view is defended by ‘working back’ so to speak, by showing that any alternative attempts to explain the relation between mind and world would inevitably lead us straight into the dizzying oscillation discussed above.

Starting from the Kantian requirement of what it is for a thought to have empirical content just noted,²² McDowell observes that, for Kant, the active use of concepts; the understanding, or spontaneity – in other words: the space of reasons – is constituted by freedom. “In a slogan”, as he says, “the space of reasons is the realm of freedom.”²³ However, as was similarly visible in Sellars’s later remarks, this contains the kernel of a potentially destabilising thought. For, if the space of reasons is without external constraints, thinking would seem to lose its grip on the world. Or as McDowell says, in working back to an expression of the one horn of the dualism the Kantian insight is supposed to overcome:

“If our freedom in empirical thinking is total, in particular if it is not constrained from outside the conceptual sphere, that can seem to threaten the very possibility that judgements of experience might be grounded in a way that relates them to a reality external to thought.”²⁴

The Kantian dictum, which McDowell so often reverts to – and which seems to sum up his own view as well – that: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without

²⁰ As he says, “One of my main aims is to suggest that Kant should still have a central place in our discussion on the way thought bears on reality.” (McDowell 1996: 3)

²¹ McDowell 1996: 4.

²² In fact, for a thought to be a thought simply *is* for it to have empirical content: “for [a thought] to lack what I am calling “representational content” [i.e. empirical content] ... would be for it not really to be a thought at all, and that is surely Kant’s point” (McDowell 1996: 4).

²³ McDowell 1996: 5.

²⁴ McDowell 1996: 5.

concepts are blind”²⁵, is supposed to safeguard us from this threat. However, the inclination to think with Sellars, that relations in the space of nature is of a *different kind* from those in the space of reasons, and that only that which falls within the space of reasons can act as justification for our beliefs – thereby excluding experience, as understood in the terms of the modern natural sciences, from providing justification for our beliefs – is strong.

The theorist who receives the dubious honour in *Mind and World* of exemplifying someone who embraces this horn of the dualism, is Donald Davidson²⁶, in whose thinking “what we wanted to conceive as exercises of concepts threaten to degenerate into moves in a self-contained game”²⁷, or as McDowell says elsewhere, “a frictionless spinning in the void.”²⁸ In Davidson’s closed-up coherentist conception of the conceptual realm, “experience can be nothing but an extra-conceptual impact on sensibility”²⁹, and so, although it “is causally relevant to a subject’s belief and judgements, ... it has no bearing on their status as justified or warranted.”³⁰

In the end, however – and as we now have come to expect – the intolerable result of coherentist positions, such as Davidson’s, leads us naturally to want to endorse the opposite pole of the dualism, which in the lectures is described as the thought that justification for our beliefs is simply *given* in experience, a mere pointing to “bare presences that are supposed to constitute the ultimate grounds of empirical judgements.”³¹ The driving intuition is, as we saw above, that experience somehow *must* be able to justify beliefs on pain of making the mind’s relation to the world unintelligible, and the leading idea is that we can make,

²⁵ McDowell 1996: footnote 3, page 5.

²⁶ “In the lectures that follow, it is mainly Donald Davidson that figures in the role I have here cast Sellars in: as someone whose reflection about experience disqualifies it from intelligibly constituting a tribunal. For these purposes, Sellars and Davidson are interchangeable.” (McDowell 1996: xv-xvi). Whether or not McDowell gives a fair interpretation of Davidson does not seem to be of great importance to my project, which is to understand certain aspects of McDowell’s philosophy, in which Davidson figures as a representative of a position that is at least *thinkable*. The following will not rely on a correct interpretation of Davidson, and I will therefore let McDowell’s reading stand unquestioned.

²⁷ McDowell 1996: 5.

²⁸ McDowell 1996: 11.

²⁹ McDowell 1996: 14.

³⁰ McDowell 1996: 14. This seems to be the fate of all coherentism: “Such theories [i.e. coherentist theories] express precisely the unnerving idea that the spontaneity of conceptual thinking is not subject to rational constraint from outside. Coherentist rhetoric suggests images of confinement within the sphere of thinking, as opposed to being in touch with something outside it.” (McDowell 1996: 15).

³¹ McDowell 1996: 24.

“the space of reasons, the space of justifications or warrants, extend more widely than the conceptual sphere. The extra extent of the space of reasons is supposed to allow it to incorporate non-conceptual impacts from outside the realm of thought.”³²

However, once more the seesaw tips the other way and we see that if experience is conceived as impingements on a sensory system, the idea that this can somehow provide us with justification appears mythical – it is the Myth of a miraculously-Given justification in brute experience, which Sellars, among others, has made implausible. And, as McDowell adds to the above quote,

“we cannot really understand the relations in virtue of which a judgement is warranted except as relations within the space of concepts: relations such as probabilification, which hold between potential exercises of conceptual capacities. The attempt to extend the scope of justificatory relations outside the conceptual sphere cannot do what it is supposed to do.”³³

Impaled on *this* horn of the dilemma we find Gareth Evans, whose view, according to McDowell, “fall into the Myth of the Given with its confusion of justification and exculpation”³⁴ by mistaking causal impingements for full-blown justificatory relations. Although it may be difficult to accept that the Myth of the Given is a myth, as McDowell says, he argues that the idea that experience can be described in terms of causal impingements on our sensory organs cannot be made into a justificatory relation. As McDowell repeats throughout: “it is one thing to be exempt from blame, on the ground that the position we find ourselves in can be traced ultimately to brute force; it is quite another thing to have a justification.”³⁵

Much of the first two lectures take the form of drawing up the two positions constituting this dualism, and to demonstrate their respective inadequacies. Instead of either of the two suggestions here deplored, McDowell suggests, as we have briefly seen, that we follow Kant in understanding experience as consisting in an interplay between spontaneity and receptivity, between concepts and bits of experiential intake. Against the

³² McDowell 1996: 7.

³³ McDowell 1996: 7.

³⁴ McDowell 1996: 14.

³⁵ McDowell 1996: 8.

coherentist-side of the dualism, we want to avoid isolating the mind from the world, to allow experience to play a justificatory role for our beliefs; and against those clutching to the Myth, we must insist that anything that aspires to play the role of a justifier must have the correct justificatory form, must belong to the space of reasons. As McDowell says, “A genuine escape would require that we avoid the Myth of the Given without renouncing the claim that experience is a rational constraint on thinking.”³⁶ Or in an oft-quoted passage, invoking a Kantian phrasing of the same: that we come to see that “receptivity does not make an even notionally separable contribution to the co-operation [between receptivity and spontaneity].”³⁷ In short: that we see experience as *already* conceptual. However, as has already been noted, and which seems to come out perspicuously in the second-last quote above; the kind of solution we are talking about is an *escape*, a way out of the dilemma, rather than something which charts a path in between the two horns of the dualism. In seeing things straight, “we can find a way to dismount from the seesaw.”³⁸

II. *Generic versus specific phrasings of the dualism*

According to McDowell, the question of how experience can justify beliefs is a species of the generic question, ‘how does mind relate to world?’. As he says in the introduction to *Mind and World*,

“The recoil to the Given that results from this worry – whether in its generic form (how can it be that exercises of spontaneity bear on a reality outside the sphere of thinking at all?) or in its specifically epistemologically form (how can it be that exercises of spontaneity amounts to knowledge?) – is a natural response to the very sort of “coherence theory of truth and knowledge” that Davidson recommends.”³⁹

³⁶ McDowell 1996: 18.

³⁷ McDowell 1996: 9.

³⁸ McDowell 1996: 9.

³⁹ McDowell 1996: 15. I had the good fortune to meet McDowell in person during a conference in Uppsala 26. – 29. September, where he confirmed to me that he thought of the dualism of mind and world as a genus with different species of the problem falling under it, and that the generic question could be “solved” (in the sense of ‘dispelled’) from any of its specific version. However, it may perhaps not be entirely clear what this amounts to, and an example may prove helpful in seeing how a question may be posed at a generic and at a specific level and to bring out the difference between the two ways of posing the question. The dictionary account of a genus, taking an example from biology, is that a genus is “a grouping of organisms having common characteristics distinct from those of other such groupings. The genus is a principal taxonomic category that ranks above species and below family” (New Oxford American Dictionary, second edition). This means that in asking e.g. what a dog is, one would be asking a question at

At the generic level, the question takes the form of a dualism of a familiar kind; an ancient dualism stemming from Descartes which leaves us struggling to explain the relation between mind and world, oscillating between the opposing, and mutually exclusive intuitions that, on the one hand, mind and world *must* be interacting, and on the other, that they *cannot* be so interacting. As McDowell says in “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space”: “The feature of the classically Cartesian picture to focus on is the effect I have already mentioned, of putting subjectivity’s very possession of an objective environment in question.”⁴⁰ The problem receives its peculiarly threatening form in Descartes’ turn inwards,⁴¹ and as McDowell notes, “Once we are gripped by the idea of a self-contained subjective realm, in which things are as they are independently of external reality (if any) ... our problem is not now that our contact with external world seems too *shaky* to count as knowledgeable, but that our picture seems to represent us as out of touch with the world altogether.”⁴²

In *Mind and World*, however, the question is mainly addressed in its specific epistemological form, and many commentators that have criticised McDowell’s proposed solution to the dilemma he here draws up – that we see concepts as already implicated in experience – have stayed at this level of the discussion.⁴³ However, the specific forms in

the generic level, i.e., at the level in which all the differences between individual *kinds* of dogs are abstracted, and we are left with a description that draws a picture of the whole genus. However, if we were to *investigate* what a dog is, we would have to choose a particular specimen of a species of dogs: we would have to pose the question e.g. by studying close-up a specific German shepherd dog, and only through studying the specific German shepherd dog would we come to know what a dog is. It is not possible to study the genus itself, but only indirectly, through its species. I believe we must understand the distinction between McDowell’s over-arching generic question: ‘how can mind be related to the world’, and the specific questions he asks; ‘how can experience justify beliefs’, and ‘how can there be *de re* senses’, as, respectively, an epistemologic and semantic *species* of the generic question. They are species of the same generic category of questions dealing with the relation between mind and world, but at a lower level of abstraction. And in the same way as in the dog-example, the generic question cannot really be answered except from studying the species that it comprises, i.e., except from solving it at the specific level. In essay III, I try to re-construct McDowell’s way of solving the generic question from his writings in semantics.

⁴⁰ McDowell 1986/1998: 250.

⁴¹ “We arrive at the fully Cartesian picture with the idea that there are no fact about the inner realm besides what is infallibly accessible to the newly recognised capacity to acquire knowledge.” McDowell 1986/1998: 241.

⁴² McDowell 1986/1998: 241. Once more, at issue is not McDowell’s exegesis of Descartes but the plausibility or thinkability of the problem.

⁴³ Gregory McCulloch seems to be one of the few exceptions, saying that “a pervasive if somewhat under-remarked theme of McDowell’s work is that this preoccupation with the *epistemology* is superficial, since knowledge ... presupposes that we can direct our minds at, think about, the empirical world.” (McCulloch 2002: 123.)

which the dualism is posed, seems almost inessential to McDowell's objective writ large, viz. to explain how the mind can be in contact with the world, but are primarily probed as ways of solving the generic question, and it seems that it is in virtue of contributing to solving the generic form that they have their interest.⁴⁴ As he says,

"It is true that modern philosophy is pervaded by apparent problems about knowledge in particular. But I think it is helpful to see those apparent problems as more or less inept expressions of a deeper anxiety – an inchoately felt threat that a way of thinking we find ourselves falling into leaves mind simply out of touch with the rest of reality, not just questionably capable of getting to know about it. A problem about crediting ourselves with knowledge is just one shape, and not the most fundamental, in which that anxiety can make itself felt."⁴⁵

This feature of McDowell's philosophy – that he poses the question of mind's relation to the world at a generic level, as well as at specific levels falling under this genus – has tended to be overlooked. But it seems that it is only once we are sensitive to this fluctuating between the generic and specific level of addressing the issue that we can properly make sense of his quietism. Once we see his question of how experience can justify beliefs as simply *one way* of carving out a place for mind in nature – from a specific epistemological perspective – it seems more plausible to hold that by showing the *possibility* of such a standing, he is not thereby committed to the further project of turning this possibility into a full-blown epistemological theory. And showing the intelligibility or possibility of such a standing; that there is no reason to see the mind-world relation as a mysterious, that there is really no problem in how we can be so related once we discard the flawed line of thinking behind the Myth of the Given and coherentism, can, it seems, be done merely by undermining the frame of thought making

⁴⁴ To follow up with the example from above: If I am wondering about what a dog is, i.e., I am wondering about the genus 'dog', and I investigate a German shepherd dog in order to find out what a dog is, I am only interested in the specimen in front of me *in so far as it is a dog*. In McDowell's case; I am only interested in the epistemological question in so far as it solves the generic question of how the mind is related to the world. If he were interested in *epistemology*, he would seemingly be obliged to produce an epistemological *explanation*, or theory, but this would come in conflict with his quietism (cf. Essay I). Cf. with note 43, above.

⁴⁵ McDowell 1996: xiii-xiv. Similarly, a few pages into lecture I on he says that, "I have modulated into talking about how the idea of the Given figures in a thought about the grounding that entitles some empirical judgements to count as knowledgeable. But this explicitly epistemological idea is straightforwardly connected with the more general idea I began with." (McDowell 1996: 6.) Which was, as we have seen, to consider "the way concepts mediate the relation between mind and world." (McDowell 1996: 3).

this standing seem impossible. A specific project, going beyond merely situating the mind in a rational relation to nature, would require ‘constructive philosophy’. But as McDowell is not in the business of giving an epistemological theory, it seems that simply making it *intelligible* how mind can stand in a rational relation to the world require no more than a quietist *showing* of how this is plausible. However, as noted, as many commentators seems to overlook this sliding between the two levels of explanation, they have tended to take him to make a proposal as to how it can be that we can have *knowledge* – something which surely would require a theory, making a quietist attitude seem out of bounds. Though, once we see the question of how experience can justify beliefs as a species of the generic question of how we can be in touch with the world, simply remaining quiet on any positive account seems to be an approach that is accessible to McDowell.

III. *The essays*

Having briefly considered the two horns of the dualism McDowell seeks to overcome, and mentioned an important distinction between the generic and specific variants of the question that governs McDowell’s inquiry, we have charted a necessary background needed in order to assess some aspects of McDowell’s philosophy more directly. As noted, much of *Mind and World* takes the form of an argument *against* the Myth of the Given and coherentism, showing them to leave us in an intolerable dualism. Nevertheless, McDowell’s tentative way out of the impasse, his notion of a ‘second nature’ which comes through a re-consideration of naturalism in favour of a ‘relaxed naturalism’ or ‘naturalized platonism’, appears to conceal an immensely rich suggestion that is left in its bare, unsatisfying outline. The idea draws on Aristotle’s ethics and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s idea of a ‘human mode of life’, and has caused many commentators to claim that McDowell needs to go much further in elaborating his idea than he does – that he cannot simply revert to quietism having engaged with material and drawn upon philosophers which takes us in a direction that seems to *invite* rather than decline further elaboration. In essay I, I consider some of the challenges that has been raised against McDowell’s claim not to be doing any ‘constructive philosophy’, his notion of ‘second nature’, and how sensitivity to the generic question – of which the question of how

experience can justify our beliefs is a species – nevertheless seems to allow for a quietist approach. It seems that if we take McDowell's interest to lay primarily with the generic version, he has merely to show the *intelligibility* of his alternative naturalism, and is not thereby committed to developing an epistemological theory.

A different challenge has been mounted by Crispin Wright, who claims that there is room for an alternative to McDowell's option in between the horns of the dreaded dilemma – which, if plausible, would undermine McDowell's invocation of the right to adopt a quietist approach as there would now be *two* suggestions on the table and no telling which one to adopt apart from the strength of the arguments in their favour. Wright claims that McDowell does not even consider the view he proposes, but I believe he does, and that he raises an objection which would push Wright into committing himself to the existence of nonconceptual content, thereby falling under the Myth-side in McDowell's schema.

The second essay addresses an issue that seems largely overlooked among philosophers who criticise McDowell's claim that our experience is conceptual, namely, what McDowell actually takes this to mean. Or differently put: what McDowell takes the debate on nonconceptualism versus conceptualism to be a debate *about*. A number of opponents to the idea that experience is conceptual standardly set out by attributing the claim that experience has only conceptual content to McDowell, without further inquiry into what McDowell takes himself to be committed to in *Mind and World*. McDowell has become a sort of 'default conceptualist', the standard opponent to a *variety* of different theories of nonconceptual content. But without a proper understanding of what he takes the debate to be about, many of the numerous suggestions that experience has a nonconceptual content seems to miss the debate fundamentally with respect to what McDowell is claiming. However, as McDowell's proposed solution to how our experience can justify our beliefs (the specifically epistemological version of the generic question of how we can occupy a rational standing in nature) is precisely that our experience is conceptual, the issue seems to be of the greatest importance in understanding *Mind and World*. In my second essay, I outline three different ways the idea that experience has a nonconceptual content has been developed, contrasting it with what I believe *McDowell* takes to be at stake in the debate.

The claim that our experience is conceptual, is, as discussed in essay I, left to a somewhat peculiar philosophical method of simply *showing itself*, in the failure of existing alternative suggestions. In essay III, I explore *another* of McDowell's attempts at dispelling the generic version of the dualism: his semantic works, starting from Frege and Russell. It seems that in his reading of these philosophers we find what may be characterised as a *constructive attempt* at solving a semantic version of the generic question. Although not set out in the same systematic way as in *Mind and World*, the solution that can be gathered from some of his articles dealing with semantic issues seems both to constitute a more detailed and more satisfying way of explaining how we can stand in a rational relation to nature. This does not solve the specifically *epistemological* phrasing of the dualism, which we encountered in *Mind and World*, but it does seem to present a good case for how to overcome the generic dualism from a semantic point of view. However, in the end, taking this to constitute a constructive solution to the generic problem seems to undermine McDowell's quietism, and although tempting, if we are to respect McDowell's quietism it seems that we must bracket the elaborate suggestion he here draws up – that we must interpret it *not* as an attempt at doing constructive philosophy.⁴⁶

All three essays seeks to respect McDowell's quietism, by paying attention to the distinction between a generic and specific level at which the question that runs like a thread through McDowell's work – 'how does mind relate to the world?' – can be posed, while at the same time seeking to bring out some of McDowell's substantial philosophical claims and insights. "Quietism", as McDowell says of Wittgenstein, "is not just a quirk of his philosophy."⁴⁷ Nor does it seem to be for McDowell.

⁴⁶ This may be disappointing, as McDowell appears to draw up a complete account of how we can have *de re* senses (the semantic version of the generic problem), only to, indirectly, recant it, by saying that he is not in the business of doing constructive philosophy. But it seems difficult to hold someone to making a substantial view when they simply revert by saying 'no, I am not doing constructive philosophy'.

⁴⁷ McDowell 1996: 94-95.

Essay I. McDowell's Quietism

I. Introduction

In the opening line of Lecture I of *Mind and World*, McDowell states that his aim in the book is to “consider ... the way concepts mediate the relation between minds and the world.”⁴⁸ Two lines below, he seems to expound minimally on his envisaged solution to that problematic relation, when he adds that; “One of my main aims is to suggest that Kant should still have a central place in our discussion of the way thought bears on reality.”⁴⁹ According to McDowell, as we have seen, Kant's clear-sightedness consisted in seeing that ‘Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind’, and much of the ensuing discussion seems designed to defend or make plausible this claim, which in non-Kantian terms translates into McDowell's pivotal claim in *Mind and World*, that our experience is conceptual. In a sweeping summary of the first section of Lecture I he appears to outline a thesis that stands in need to be defended:

“So the picture is this: the fact that thoughts are not empty, the fact that thoughts have representational content, emerges out of an interplay of concepts and intuition.”⁵⁰

This seems suspiciously much like a substantial philosophical claim, a claim that, as the above quote seems to suggest, will be vindicated by showing how Kant should still hold a central place in our thinking on the mind-world relation. However, whereas the first section of Lecture I may plausibly be taken to set up the issue as a search for a *solution* to the vexing question of how our minds are related to the world, the appended introduction to the second edition of the book frames the overall objective somewhat differently. Here McDowell claims that his aim is to,

“propose an account, in a diagnostic spirit, of some characteristic anxieties of modern philosophy – anxieties that centre, as my title indicates, on the relation between mind and world. Continuing with the medical metaphor, we might say that a satisfactory diagnosis ought to point towards a cure. I aim at

⁴⁸ McDowell 1996: 3.

⁴⁹ McDowell 1996: 3.

⁵⁰ McDowell 1996: 4.

explaining how it comes about that we seem to be confronted with philosophical obligations of a familiar sort, and I want the explanation to enable us to unmask the appearance as illusion.”⁵¹

The message is repeated towards the end of McDowell’s introduction, with McDowell arguing that “there is no prospect of answering the question [concerning the relation between mind and world] as it was putatively meant.”⁵² A thought, which leads him to conclude that:

“So if I am right about the character of the philosophical anxieties I aim to deal with [i.e. that they cannot be answered], there is no room for doubt that engaging in “constructive philosophy”, in this sense, is not the way to approach them. As I have put it, we need to exorcise the questions rather than set about answering them. Of course that takes hard work: if you like, constructive philosophy in another sense. And of course that is what I offer in this book.”⁵³

However, if McDowell’s objective is *not* to engage in constructive philosophy, how do we make it fit with the opening of lecture I, which at least *appears* to promise a solution to the relation between mind and world in the form of a substantial philosophical thesis – a thesis whose positive claim is that Kant should be reintroduced in our theorising about the mind-world relation? For the Kantian-inspired claim that ‘representational content emerges out of an interplay of concepts and intuitions’ at least *seems* like something which would classify as a substantial claim on the relation between minds and the world.

But the issue is further complicated by the ambiguity of the above quote, for McDowell openly says that exorcising the questions on the mind-world relation takes hard work and ‘constructive philosophy in another sense’. But how are we to understand ‘constructive philosophy in another sense’? Is there a viable intermediate position here, or is the reference to ‘constructive philosophy in another sense’ merely revealing of a tension between McDowell’s official quietism and an actual, substantial line of argument set out in *Mind and World*?

⁵¹ McDowell 1996: xi.

⁵² McDowell 1996: xxiv.

⁵³ McDowell 1996: xxiv.

II. *Disbelief and shrugged shoulders*

A number of commentators have found McDowell's quietist proclamations hard to swallow. To some it just seems like an incredible claim that McDowell's rich and interesting work should make no pretensions at explanation – "belied though it is by his actual practice"⁵⁴, as one commentator says; to others, his profession of quietism is incoherent with his deep and attentive engagement with the philosophical tradition laying behind the dualism that occupies much of his work.⁵⁵ It seems simply disingenuous to opt for quietism when one has taken the traditional philosophical attempts to deal with the issues as seriously as McDowell has. However, in addition to the grappling with how to make sense of McDowell's claim that he is not engaged in constructive philosophy, there is also the question of whether quietism is even a possibility for him: has McDowell really exhausted the space of possibilities by juxtaposing his own view to coherentism and the Myth of the Given?

Michael Friedman starts by noting how McDowell's approach to the dualism that he seeks to surpass is deeply informed by the history of philosophy; that the modern phrasing of the dualism in terms of scheme and content is, in McDowell's work, aligned with the long tradition in western philosophy of addressing the mind-body problem. However, it does not escape Friedman that McDowell's primary use of this tradition is as a means of *dispelling* the intrinsically uncomfortable dualism inherited from Descartes – although he appears to do so from within that tradition. As he says, "The kind of exorcism at which McDowell aims thus requires an internal engagement with the tradition rather than the merely external "debunking" characteristic of Richard Rorty's work."⁵⁶ However, herein lies also the problem, as Friedman sees it. For whereas Wittgenstein's quietism consisted of a "deliberate step back from any explicit engagements with the philosophical tradition"⁵⁷ in favour of a "method of exploring the limits of language *from within*"⁵⁸, McDowell's engagement with the history of philosophy seems rather to place him in a succession of philosophers – including Aristotle and Gadamer, whom McDowell discusses favourably – who have focused on

⁵⁴ Larmore 2002: 200.

⁵⁵ Friedmann 2002: 48.

⁵⁶ Friedmann 2002: 29.

⁵⁷ Friedmann 2002: 48.

⁵⁸ Friedmann 2002: 48.

practical knowledge and “empirically given linguistic cultural traditions”⁵⁹ as a way of explaining how we can be directed towards the world.⁶⁰ Rather than quietism – which, as Friedman argues, may make sense only in a Wittgensteinian detached stance towards the tradition and its solutions – McDowell’s work appears thus as continuing a tradition debating how best to *explain* our openness to the world, and thus to represent a theory on the mind-world relations which thereby defeats its own claim not to engage in constructive philosophy.

In a similar vein, Charles Larmore argues that McDowell has “In reality ... embarked upon the construction of a comprehensive theory of mind and world”⁶¹. In distinction from Friedman though, Larmore maintains that, due to insufficient attention to what it is for something to be a reason, McDowell’s theory fails to show how “experience can be a tribunal”⁶² justifying our beliefs, and in the end, that McDowell’s quietism “only blinds him to the problems he has yet to face.”⁶³ However, Larmore seems to retain a prejudice towards quietism, independent of what he sees as the failed attempt by McDowell of occupying that position. As he says,

“Wittgenstein’s quietism has been enormously influential, despite the inescapable paradox that manifestly lies at its heart. For how, we must ask, can showing up the mistaken assumptions underlying some philosophical problem amount to anything other than putting better views in their place? And must not these views be of a similar scope and thus provide the makings of a positive theory of the phenomena in question?”⁶⁴

To Larmore, “Montaigne provides a better model than Wittgenstein”, quoting Montaigne as saying that, “There is no end to our inquiries ... It is a sign of narrowness of mind when the mind is content, or of weariness.”⁶⁵ However, it would be somewhat ungenerous to read McDowell from such an entrenched disbelief in the method he attempts to employ – to not even try to understand McDowell’s claims on its own terms.

⁵⁹ Friedmann 2002: 47.

⁶⁰ As McDowell says towards the end, “I postpone any discussion of the connection between language and the spontaneity of the understanding until the sketchy remarks at the end of this lecture; meanwhile I adapt Gadamer’s remarks to my purpose.” (McDowell 1996: 116, footnote 6.)

⁶¹ Larmore 2002: 195.

⁶² Larmore 2002: 202.

⁶³ Larmore 2002: 206.

⁶⁴ Larmore 2002: 194.

⁶⁵ Larmore 2002: 194.

Moreover, as McDowell concedes in his response to Larmore, “Interesting philosophical afflictions are deep-seated. Even after temporarily successful therapy, they re-emerge, perhaps perennially, in new forms.”⁶⁶ Being a quietist does not mean that one has found a way of eliminating the pressure from philosophy once and for all: “The impulse finds peace only occasionally and temporally.”⁶⁷

Larmore’s bleak view of the possibility of quietism aside, one of the harshest criticisms – subsequently met with one of the sharpest replies on McDowell’s part – have come from Crispin Wright, who claims that McDowell fails to take account of the possibility of an alternative position in between the two horns of the dualism. Wright argues that the ‘commonsensical suggestion’ he envisages “is so salient that I find it hard to believe that McDowell does not somewhere intend to speak directly to it.”⁶⁸ And surely, if there is a plausible alternative view, McDowell cannot quietly sit back and let his preferred view simply *show itself* – conceptualism would then no longer be vindicated by being the only view left standing after having undermined coherentism and the Myth of the Given. If Wright can plausibly make the case that there is room for an alternative understanding of how experience can justify our beliefs it would indeed pose a serious threat to McDowell’s quietism. For unless, as Wright says, his alternative suggestion of how experience can justify beliefs is “open to decisive objection”,

“much of the dialectical progression of the first half of *Mind and World* is undercut. McDowell’s proposal, that we should regard it as intrinsic to experience that it draws on the very conceptual resources involved in active, self-critical thought, will be supererogatory; we will be able to dismount from the seesaw without it”⁶⁹

But can we conceive of such a view in the face of McDowell’s extensive efforts to categorize most of modern philosophy as falling to either of coherentism or the Myth of the Given? Wright argues that there *is* an alternative on the side of what McDowell deems mythical – and that he passes it by due to a “failure to characterize the targeted

⁶⁶ McDowell 2002: 294.

⁶⁷ McDowell 1996: 177.

⁶⁸ Wright 2002a: 150.

⁶⁹ Wright 2002a: 150.

error sufficiently sharply.”⁷⁰ As he says in the response to a response, “McDowell sees no space between the ideas that experience is a brute Given – blind intuition with nothing to say – and his own preferred conception that it essentially draws on the passive exercise of conceptual capacities. But there is, of course, intermediate space.”⁷¹

III. Wright’s objection

Wright considers two objections to McDowell’s solution. The first objection questions what appears to be McDowell’s requirement that experience must be able to justify in a way similar to the relation of inferential justification that holds between beliefs. As he says,

“McDowell proceeds as though in such a case [i.e. in perception] experience has to take over something *akin* to the role played by belief in inferential cases: that non-inferential justification differs from inferential only in that the justifier is not a belief but some other content-bearing state. Call this the *quasi-inferential* conception of empirical justification. Generalized, the quasi-inferential conception would have it that each of our justified beliefs are justified by its relation to an antecedent *something-that-P*.”⁷²

The second worry Wright raises “contrasts with the foregoing by retaining the quasi-inferential conception, and granting McDowell that the justificatory potential of experience depends upon its being received as a carrier of content”⁷³, i.e. that experience must be received as conceptual in order to play a justificatory role.⁷⁴ Wright then goes on to argue that “the idea that in order for experience to have this potential, the *very having of it* demands the exercise of conceptual capacities”⁷⁵ is an extra, non-mandatory claim on McDowell’s part. In fact, he argues, we can easily see how the last requirement can be circumvented while conceding McDowell the first.

⁷⁰ Wright 2002b: 160.

⁷¹ Wright 2002a: 149.

⁷² Wright 2002a: 148. I will limit myself to discussing the second objection Wright raises, as it, rather than rejecting McDowell’s framework flat out, tries to show that there is space for an alternative suggestion within the landscape McDowell draws up. And, as it seems, if there is room for an alternative dispelling of the dualism, McDowell’s quietism cannot be sustained.

⁷³ Wright 2002a: 149.

⁷⁴ This seems to be a fair gloss to put on what Wright says, based on how he defines the quasi-inferential conception (cf. above). What the quasi-inferential conception of justification is supposed to take over is precisely the thought “that justificatory relations have to be contentual, and so can be sustained only by conceptually structured items.” (Wright 2002a: 148).

⁷⁵ Wright 2002a: 149.

The motivating thought behind seeking a solution that refrains from taking onboard this latter claim is the argument from children and animal experience; that if we impose such strict restrictions on what it is to have an experience, we exclude animals and young children from having experiences, as they cannot be said to possess concepts. However, taking his stand does not mean that we are back in the dreaded seesaw, according to Wright. He thinks we can avoid impaling ourselves on either horn of the dualism,

“if it is allowed that an experience of the outer world, while not itself ontologically dependent upon an actual exercise of conceptual capacities, is intrinsically such as to carry the information, for a suitably conceptually endowed creature, that P.”⁷⁶

Having an experience is, on Wright’s suggestion, not *dependent* upon conceptual capacities, but it has, as he says on the following page, “the intrinsic potential to command a certain conceptual response from a suitably endowed thinker”⁷⁷; i.e. it has the potential to act as a justifier for a concept-possessing creature, without, as he adds “that such a response is constitutive of its very being [an experience of that kind].”⁷⁸ In giving content to his idea this way, Wright explicitly sets himself apart from Gareth Evans’s claim that we, in perceiving, encounter informational states with a nonconceptual content, which, in serving as input to a concept-possessing creature can be transformed into conceptual states. Evans’s view seems to imply that the conceptual response, on Wright’s terms, *is* constitutive of its being an experience,⁷⁹ but the important part is that Wright claims to be able to stay neutral on the question of nonconceptual content – which makes it unintelligible to him why McDowell does not even consider this way of dispelling the dualism. Surely the commonsensical view – which saves the experiential lives of young children and animals – is to see experience as concept-independent, while at the same time providing those possessing concepts with an ‘intrinsic potential’ of forming a

⁷⁶ Wright 2002a: 149.

⁷⁷ Wright 2002a: 150.

⁷⁸ Wright 2002a: 150.

⁷⁹ As McDowell quotes Evans as saying, “perceptual informational states, with their nonconceptual content, “are not *ipso facto* perceptual *experiences* – that is, states of a conscious subject” (p. 157.) ... [but] only if its non-conceptual content is available as “input to a *thinking, concept-applying, and reasoning system*””. (McDowell 1996: 49)

conceptual response? According to Wright, McDowell's requirement that experience demands the possession of concepts is nothing but a supposition. As he says, McDowell

"does not dismiss the idea that something *is* 'given' in experience: he believes in a *conceptual* given – what he regards as mythical is, rather, the notion of a given which is both justificatory *and* 'independent of conceptual abilities.'" He does not argue for this incompatibility but just asserts it, and I do not know how he would rebut an awkward customer who just counter-asserted that "occurrences in consciousness that are independent of conceptual capacities" can justify."⁸⁰

However, a quietist would not really find Wright *or* his awkward customer particularly worrying, but is a 'shrug of the shoulder' – McDowell's offer – an acceptable response, or has Wright sketched a view that proposes a plausible way to bridge McDowell's dilemma without invoking the possession of conceptual abilities – in which case mere shoulder-shrugging will not do?⁸¹

It is difficult to see exactly what Wright's suggestion is, as he does not present much of an elaboration of his view – except from saying that experience has the potential to command a certain conceptual response from a concept-possessor. However, taking into account that Wright is concerned to bring young children and animals into the fold again, a natural way of taking his words would be that he holds something along these lines: that we share sensitivity of our surroundings with children and animals, and that, viewed thus, an experience would be an experience of *something-that-P* to both me and the dog, although only I, having concepts, could use that something as the further justification for my belief that P. Such an interpretation seems to fit nicely with saying that experience commands a certain conceptual response from concept-users, while not equating the experience with the actual employment of concepts on the part of the concept-possessor. However, if I *did* form a belief based on the experience, that would be as a result of the 'intrinsic potential' inherent in experience to 'command of me a certain conceptual

⁸⁰ Wright 2002b: 160-161. Wright's own suggestion, however, seems equally unsupported – he seems merely to claim that it is the 'commonsensical' view, and should therefore, presumably, be adopted. The question, however, is whether McDowell's distinction of available solutions as falling into either versions of coherentism or the Myth of the Given exhausts the space of possibilities, and whether he therefore is entitled to adopt a quietist attitude of leaving his view undefended, simply shining forth in the absence of plausible contenders.

⁸¹ As McDowell says, in a passage invoking Wittgenstein's quietism; "I think the response we should aim at being entitled to, if someone raises a question like "What constitutes the structure of the space of reasons?", is something like a shrug of the shoulders." (McDowell 1996: 178.)

response’ – which seems to come close to saying that having an experience is a disposition to form a belief (on the part of concept-possessors). Such a view would furthermore be neutral on whether or not the content received in experience was nonconceptual or not, which was what Wright claimed on behalf of his suggestion.

However, if this is Wright’s view, it is a view that McDowell *does* seem to discuss – and which he curtly dismisses as falling under the Myth of the Given. As he says,

“It is not that actual operations of conceptual capacities first figure only in *actualizations of dispositions to judge*, with which experiences are identified – so that experiences is connected with concepts only by way of a *potentiality*. Having things appear to one a certain way is already itself a mode of actual operations of conceptual capacities.”⁸²

This seems directly to address and dismiss Wright’s suggestion, whose claim is that *when* I judge, that is to give the conceptual response that experience has commanded of me – i.e. it is the actualization of my potential to judge – and it is only *then* that concepts are invoked. (Although, as we saw; even in the absence of such a commandment of experience, the experience would be an experience of *something-that-P*.) However, the point is not that McDowell here presents new, strong arguments to undermine Wright’s suggestion – once again, McDowell seems merely to *state* his view – only that he *does* discuss Wright’s suggestion, and dismisses it as belonging to the Myth-side of the dualism. As such, it cannot be claimed that McDowell simply overlooks this possibility, but that he thinks the view Wright presents falls once one sees the issue under discussion in its proper light: i.e. that such a view does not enter from outside the scope of possibilities he considers, but can be dismissed of as Mythical, and therefore dealt with through a quietist approach. The flaw that Wright’s view suffers from – an objection that does not affect a view taking concepts as *already* operating in experience – is that,

“when there is an inclination to make a judgement of experience, the inclination seems to float mysteriously free of the situation, taking on the look of an unaccountable conviction that some concept “has application in the immediate vicinity”.⁸³

⁸² McDowell 1996: 62 (my emphasis).

⁸³ McDowell 1996: 62.

Wright's scarcely developed suggestion seems to be open to precisely that objection – that there is *nothing* that explains why I am compelled into judging *that P*, and not some other proposition, by the experience I am entertaining, unless, that is, we hold that experience comes with a nonconceptual content, which would then determine how my conceptualization of that content turned out. But if the latter were the case, Wright would clearly fall on the Myth-side in McDowell's set-up of the dualism, and that was a stance, as we have seen, on which he explicitly wanted to remain neutral.⁸⁴

IV. *Second nature and constructive philosophy in a different sense*

So are we to take McDowell's word for it, that he can properly be described as *not* involved in constructive philosophy, and moreover, that he seems justified in his quietism, having narrowed the range of plausible solutions in between coherentism and the Myth of the Given to his own?⁸⁵

There is of course a sense, as he says, in which he *is* engaged in constructive philosophy: criticising the Myth of the Given and coherentism is supposed to clear the ground for a proper understanding of how we can avoid being baffled by the incompatible pair of pressing intuitions leading us into the dualism in the first place. A scrutiny of McDowell's work reveals that his approach often takes the shape of undermining frameworks which he sees as impeding philosophical insights, and *Mind and World* is no exception in this respect. As he says towards the end of the lecture on

⁸⁴ In his reply to Wright, McDowell seems even less susceptible to see Wright's suggestion as finding a way in between coherentism and the Myth of the Given than I have been here. He bluntly characterises it as a version of the Myth, saying that, "In Wright's second alternative to my picture of the justification for belief that experience constitutes, the ultimate warrant for an empirical belief has to be the non-conceptual occurrence in consciousness that is said to "sustain" or "command" a particular conceptualization. ... [The Myth] is the idea that non-conceptual occurrences in consciousness can rationally dictate, or sustain, or command, or warrant anything. ... Wright's alternative is, as I said, clearly a case of the Myth of the Given in this sense." (McDowell 2002: 289)

⁸⁵ This is of course not meant to clear McDowell of any criticism. A number of authors, such as e.g. Christopher Peacocke, have charged McDowell with the claim that experience has nonconceptual content. But this would be to press a different issue from the one Wright explores, namely, that content which is nonconceptual *can* play a justificatory role. As we saw, Wright concedes (in the second objection he raises) that content must be conceptually structured in order to play a justificatory role, and as such tries to find an alternative solution that respects McDowell's premises. Arguing against Peacocke (who falls to the Myth-side of McDowell's dualism) would take the quietist form of simply showing that view to be untenable. What I mean by suggesting that McDowell is justified in his quietist approach is therefore no more than this: that if he can shovel all the contenders to either side of the dualism he seems free to adopt the strategy of undermining his opponents views, in the hope that his own suggestion will simply *show itself* as the only plausible solution left.

nonconceptual content: “If one fails to see that conceptual capacities can be operative in sensibility itself, one has two options [i.e. coherentism and the Myth of the Given] ... My point is that we need not confine ourselves within this framework of possibilities.”⁸⁶ It seems therefore that if we take into account this ‘destruction of frameworks’ as a vital part of his philosophy, we have a perfectly good sense in which McDowell can claim to be engaged in a ‘constructive philosophy in a different sense’.

Nevertheless, at times it seems as McDowell goes beyond the self-imposed, restrictive mandate that he professes to be adhering to, and in lecture V we find him saying that,

“At the end of my second lecture (§8), I said that if we take Kant’s conception of experience out of the frame he puts it in, a story about a transcendental affection of receptivity by a supersensible reality, it becomes just what we need. Outside that frame, Kant’s conception is a satisfactory way to avoid our dilemma, the apparently forced choice between the Myth of the Given and a coherentism that renounces external constraints on thinking.”⁸⁷

McDowell seems here to be proposing more than a destructive program, rather he seems clearly to be saying that if we adopt Kant’s conception of experience outside his framework of a ‘supersensible reality’ we see our way through the dilemma. And it is difficult to understand this move other than as a substantial philosophical suggestion – a suggestion, which appears to become further substantiated when he on the following page adds that, “Kant’s lack of a pregnant notion of *second nature* explains why the right conception of experience cannot find a firm position in his thinking.”⁸⁸ In fact, the notions of a ‘second nature’ and *Bildung* appear very much like components of a substantial philosophical theory, and seem to play an increasingly important role as the

⁸⁶ McDowell 1996: 62-63. Of other places where the ‘destruction of frameworks’ seems to play a central role in McDowell’s philosophy, one could mention the following: in “Meaning, Communication, and Knowledge”, McDowell charges Strawson with “endors[ing] a specific proposal about the nature of communication that I have found questionable.” (McDowell 1980/1998: 49); in “De Re Senses” McDowell seeks to criticise a “theoretical structure” within which a certain set of ideas are incomprehensible. (McDowell 1984/1998: 214); and in “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge”, his concern is with some traditional epistemological assumptions, embarking on “the project of undermining an idea that seems central to them.” (1982/1998: 370).

⁸⁷ McDowell 1996: 95-96.

⁸⁸ McDowell 1996: 97 (my emphasis).

book progresses and as coherentism and the Myth of the Given has been put to rest in the opening lectures.⁸⁹

The idea of a second nature is first introduced in lecture IV, when McDowell attempts to tackle head-on an assumption common to coherentists and those subscribing to the Myth of the Given alike; “a deep-rooted mental block that produces this uncomfortable situation”⁹⁰, as he says. The impediment that prevents philosophers – of which Evans and Davidson are held up as examples – from even considering the idea that concepts are implicated in experience⁹¹, starts from the thought that we share perceptual sensitivity to our surroundings with mere dumb animals. There seems quite intuitively to be a sense in which we share ‘first nature’, as McDowell later says, with many of our fellow animals, and that our ‘spontaneity’, or concept-possession is a feature of our experience best explained as an additional, on top of that common basis of perceptual sensitivity. But that merely serves to underline the commonality between dumb animals and us. As he says, “Sentience is a feature of animal life, and it should be something animal in our case too.”⁹² However, if sentience belongs to *nature* it may be difficult to see how to get concept-possession into the picture. “How”, as McDowell rhetorically asks, “could the operations of a bit of mere nature be structured by spontaneity, the freedom that empowers us to take charge of our active thinking?”⁹³ The worry is prone to leads us straight into the space of available options that Davidson and Evans find themselves in – a set of options that places us squarely on the road towards the dreaded seesaw.

The root of the problem springs from a conception of nature, which may, as McDowell says, seem ‘sheer common sense’, but which, as we will see, he thinks we need to reconsider when it comes to giving an account of our human situatedness – our place as minded beings – in the world. It is the most natural thing for us to think of nature

⁸⁹ As he says, “Given the notion of a second nature, we can say that the way our lives are shaped by reason is natural, even while we deny that the structure of the space of reasons can be integrated into the layout of the realm of law. This is the partial re-enchantment of nature that I spoke of.”

⁹⁰ McDowell 1996: 69. As he concedes; “This is a task I have had hanging over me since my first lecture.” (McDowell 1996: 69)

⁹¹ As he complains, “But they [i.e. Evans and Davidson] do not so much as consider the possibility that conceptual capacities might already be operative in actualizations of sensibility. It is not that they argue that there is no such possibility; it simply does not figure in their thinking.” (McDowell 1996: 67).

⁹² McDowell 1996: 70.

⁹³ McDowell 1996: 70.

in terms of objects describable in the terms of the natural sciences, interacting according to physical laws – in short: to conceive of nature as a realm of law. However, the thought that the space of reasons was to be distinguished from a law-governed physical nature is a product of modern scientific thinking, and as such a radical break with and liberation from the medieval conception of nature as ‘filled with meaning’ – “as if all of nature where a book of lessons for us”⁹⁴. Now, it is not that McDowell sees the modern conception of nature as in itself worthy of criticism, or that he longs for a return to the medieval conception of nature – it is not that he advocates a “regress into a pre-scientific superstition, a crazily nostalgic attempt to re-enchant the natural world.”⁹⁵ As he says, “it is a mark of intellectual progress that educated people cannot now take that idea [of a world ‘filled with meaning’] seriously, except perhaps in some symbolic role.”⁹⁶ But this ‘disenchanted’ nature – in Weber’s now commonplace image – leaves the door open to the line of thought from which Evans and Davidson starts, and which McDowell describes as the mental block that prevents them from perceiving a way out of the captivating dualism they find themselves in: if we demarcate the realm of nature from the space of reasons we make an eventual *rational* interaction between the two unintelligible. And it is the “placing [of] things in a logical space that is *sui generis*, by comparison with the realm of law”⁹⁷ that effects the block that prevents us from seeing how our sensitivity to nature and our conceptual abilities can interact.

Operating within the modern scientific framework in trying to give an account of human mindedness in nature leaves us, according to McDowell with three options. On the one hand – on what McDowell dubs ‘bald naturalism’ – one can staunchly bite the bullet and claim that there is nothing over and against the natural, and that ‘intentionality’, ‘meaning’ and ‘content’ is reducible to objects that can be given a purely scientific description. On this view, “we can reconstruct the structure of the space of reasons out of conceptual materials that already belong in a natural scientific depiction of nature.”⁹⁸ So conceived, there is really not a major problem of explaining how content or

⁹⁴ McDowell 1996: 71.

⁹⁵ McDowell 1996: 72.

⁹⁶ McDowell 1996: 71.

⁹⁷ McDowell 1996: 72.

⁹⁸ McDowell 1996: 73.

meaning comes to have a place in a strictly scientific understanding of nature. True, there might be lots that remain before we actually have that one-to-one translation of what we normally see as falling under the space of reasons into purely physical terms, but that is no reason to despair of the project. ‘Bald naturalism’ is therefore, as McDowell says, “a style of thinking that would simply dismiss the fuss I have made over spontaneity.”⁹⁹

The second option, which together with the third option McDowell goes on to sketch, distinguishes itself from ‘bald naturalism’ in that it “holds that the contrast that poses our difficulties, the contrast of logical spaces, is genuine.”¹⁰⁰ The first of the two options is McDowell’s own preferred solution of seeing concepts as already implicated in experience. In danger of being misinterpreted to express a revisionary longing for a re-enchantment of nature, however, this view “requires that we resist the characteristically modern conception according to which something’s way of being natural is its position in the realm of law.”¹⁰¹ This is in fact the crux of the matter, for as he goes on to say “The third [set of options] diverges in just that respect.”¹⁰² This third set of responses accepts that the space of reasons cannot be reduced to the space of nature, and indeed, sharply demarcates the realm of nature from the space of reasons. But it also equates the realm of nature with the realm of law, and it is the latter idea that leads Mythists and coherentists alike into the pickle.¹⁰³

If we set aside ‘bald naturalism’, it is *this* – the patent incompatibility between a realm of nature, interpreted as a realm of physical *laws*, and the space of reasons – that should motivate us to look for a new understanding of nature, an understanding which must somehow free it of its, so to speak, ‘overly modern’ constraints.¹⁰⁴ However, in

⁹⁹ McDowell 1996: 72.

¹⁰⁰ McDowell 1996: 73.

¹⁰¹ McDowell 1996: 74.

¹⁰² McDowell 1996: 74.

¹⁰³ Commenting on the third set of responses, McDowell says that, “What I have in mind here is a way of thinking that is almost explicit in Davidson” (McDowell 1996: 74), which, in putting a McDowellian spin on Davidson, comes to the claim that, “the intellectual role of those spontaneity-related concepts cannot be duplicated in terms of concepts whose fundamental point is to place things in the realm of law.” (McDowell 1996: 74.) Although he does not mention Evans here, he is grouped alongside Davidson. As McDowell says, somewhat earlier, “Both Davidson and Evans aim to accommodate the point of Kant’s talk of spontaneity. Neither of them is tempted by a bald naturalism that would opt out of this area of philosophy altogether, by denying that the spontaneity of the understanding is *sui generis* in the way suggested by the link to freedom.” (McDowell 1996: 67.)

¹⁰⁴ We have in McDowell’s thinking three kinds of naturalism; there is the bald naturalism, which “blames the trouble on the idea that spontaneity is *sui generis*”, and then there is “also the naturalism that equates

saying that much, the burden seems to be on McDowell to provide us with an alternative to the view of nature that he here rejects; a view that explains how nature can be seen as different from the realm of law, and at the same time, a suggestion that avoids being a ‘crazily, nostalgic attempt to re-enchant the natural world’. But how, exactly, is this to be imagined?

McDowell is unfortunately rather sketchy on this important question, although the work that remains seems at least fairly clearly cut out for us from the preceding discussion of the faults of ‘bald naturalism’, and the naturalism Evans and Davidson embraces: what we need to do is to rethink our ‘actualization of our nature’, come up with a new naturalism, so to speak, that brings “responsiveness to meaning back into operations of our natural sentient capacities as such, even while we insist that responsiveness to meaning cannot be captured in naturalistic terms, so long as “naturalistic” is glossed in terms of the realm of law.”¹⁰⁵

However, as McDowell notes, “This can easily seem to commit us to a rampant platonism”¹⁰⁶: the idea that the space of reasons is not natural at all, that it, on the contrary, belongs to a kind of ‘inhuman’ or non-human structure which would make it look “as if we are picturing human beings as partly in nature and partly outside it.”¹⁰⁷ So conceived, the space of reasons would look more like a ‘supernaturalism’, as McDowell comments, rather than something which could properly be labelled under the heading “naturalism” in that it would not really have anything to do with the natural. But we are not obliged to equate the space of nature with the realm of law, and we are therefore not forced to “interpret the claim that the space of reason is *sui generis* as a refusal to naturalize the requirements of reason.”¹⁰⁸ There is still room for a naturalized space of reasons, as long as we do not equate nature with law, and without that entailing that we tip over into a ‘rampant platonism’. As McDowell says,

nature with the realm of law” exemplified by Davidson and Evans. But McDowell would seemingly like to be able to call his own view a form of naturalism, and he argues that “If we can rethink our conception of nature so as to make room for spontaneity, even though we deny that spontaneity is capturable by the resources of bald naturalism, we shall by the same token be rethinking our conception of what it takes for a position to deserve to be called “naturalism”.” (All quotes, McDowell 1996: 77). Later, we find McDowell speaking of his own position as a ‘relaxed naturalism’ or a ‘naturalized platonism’.

¹⁰⁵ McDowell 1996: 77.

¹⁰⁶ McDowell 1996: 77.

¹⁰⁷ McDowell 1996: 77.

¹⁰⁸ McDowell 1996: 78.

“Exercises of spontaneity belong to our mode of living. And our mode of living is our way of actualizing ourselves as animals. So we can rephrase the thought by saying: exercises of spontaneity belong to our way of actualizing ourselves as animals. This removes any need to try and see ourselves as peculiarly bifurcated, with a foothold in the animal kingdom and a mysterious separate involvement in an extra-natural world of rational connections.”¹⁰⁹

McDowell finds a model for this way of conceiving nature in Aristotle’s ethics – although, it is perhaps best to say: in a somewhat unorthodox reading of Aristotle, which denies attributing to him a kind of ‘bald naturalism’ as ‘historically monstrous’. According to McDowell, Aristotle cannot – in contrast to how many modern commentators tend to read him – be credited “with aiming to construct the requirements of ethics out of independent facts about human nature.”¹¹⁰ Instead, we must see Aristotle, according to McDowell as saying that ethical questions are something that can be dealt with from *within* an ethical standpoint. It is not that we can take a ‘sideways-on’ view of ethical questions – and in the prolongation: a sideways-on view of the space of reasons – that would be accessible from “facts that could be in view independently of the viewer’s participation in ethical life and thought”¹¹¹. On the contrary, ethics only comes into view *because* the viewer occupies an ethical position; it is only *from* the space of reason that something can be a reason. The connection between Aristotle’s discussion on ethics and the space of reasons can be made explicit if we enrich his discussion of ethics, for our purpose, so as “to include a proper place for reflectiveness.”¹¹² As such, as McDowell says, the thought can be put thus:

“The ethical is a domain of rational requirements, which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them. We are alerted to these demands by acquiring appropriate conceptual capacities. When a decent upbringing initiate us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are opened to the very existence of this tract of the space of reasons.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ McDowell 1996: 78.

¹¹⁰ McDowell 1996: 79.

¹¹¹ McDowell 1996: 83.

¹¹² McDowell 1996: 82.

¹¹³ McDowell 1996: 82.

The view of nature that is here sketched is supposed to steer clear of the inherent flaws of ‘bald naturalism’ and ‘rampant platonism’, both of which, each in their own ways, makes a rethinking of the concept of nature impossible: the first, by equating nature with the realm of law; the second, by pushing the space of reasons forever out of nature’s reach and into a ‘supernatural’ sphere. In wishing to construe his view as a version of naturalism, while distancing it from the above, corrupted forms, McDowell speaks of the conception of nature he here draws up sometime as a “relaxed naturalism” or a “naturalized platonism”, thereby emphasising that it is a conception of nature which makes room for a standing in the space of reasons. The standing we thus acquire is a standing in nature which comes about through an upbringing, or an ‘initiation’ into a space of reasons, as part of “what it is for a human being to come to maturity.”¹¹⁴ And the “resulting habits of thought and action” from this upbringing – from this *Bildung* – as he says, “are second nature”¹¹⁵: a view of nature that allows us to see how spontaneity can be inextricably implicated in receptivity.

V. *Quietism revisited*

The suggestion McDowell offers is supposed to soothe us into seeing how there can be a naturalism that does not prohibit a standing in the space of reasons. However, this sketch still appears to leave the most important thing to be explained out of the picture: how, precisely, can a ‘decent upbringing’ present us with a second nature, a standing in the space of reasons? Surely, this important question of what it is to acquire a second nature cannot be left to such scanty remarks as “having one’s eyes opened to reasons”¹¹⁶ through the appropriate *Bildung*? Or less metaphorically; that *Bildung* “actualizes of some of the potential we are born with.”¹¹⁷ Without further explanation, the transformation that is supposed to take place in *Bildung* risks looking nothing short of mysterious – in spite of McDowell’s assurances that “nothing occult happens to a human being in ordinary upbringing.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ McDowell 1996: 84.

¹¹⁵ McDowell 1996: 84.

¹¹⁶ McDowell 1996: 84.

¹¹⁷ McDowell 1996: 88.

¹¹⁸ McDowell 1996: 123.

However, contrary to what one would think, this is precisely what McDowell claims we can. According to McDowell, we are fully justified in leaving the nature of second nature to such incomplete remarks, as it is not supposed to represent ‘a bit of constructive philosophy’. In contrast to what one may have thought when the idea was first introduced – as a proper conception of nature that would rectify the inadequacies of ‘bald naturalism’ and the naturalism embraced by Evans and Davidson – McDowell’s introduction of second nature is meant only to,

“dislodge the background that makes such questions look pressing, the dualism of reason and nature. It is not meant to be a move – which could at best be a first move – in constructing a response to that question.”¹¹⁹

Rather, as McDowell argues: “The phrase serves only as a shorthand for a “reminder”, an attempt to recall our thinking from running into grooves that make it look as if we need constructive philosophy.”¹²⁰ The nature of the space of reasons is therefore not really a question to be answered at all, and faced with the demand that we spell out the precise structure of the space of reasons as it comes out in a relaxed platonism, we are entitled to simply remain quiet, inert, and unmoved by implorations. Or as McDowell says, “the response we should aim at being entitled to, if someone raises a question like “What constitutes the structure of the space of reasons?”, is something like a shrug of the shoulders.”¹²¹ In fact, trying to answer the question would lead us into the fruitless and fatiguing seesaw that Evans and Davidson finds themselves in, and it is only by developing a notion of second nature that we can break the circle.

However, in invoking the notions of *Bildung* and second nature McDowell seems to set his foot on a path that *demand*s that he say more than he is officially willing to. The richness and complexity of human society, of communication, and of such thick concepts as ‘tradition’ and *Bildung*, which McDowell puts into play with increased frequency towards the end of the book, does not seem to be a place where one can decline to say more when pressed for an answer. On the contrary, these concepts seem to require just such learned treatments as the ones McDowell himself often quotes favourably;

¹¹⁹ McDowell 1996: 178.

¹²⁰ McDowell 1996: 95.

¹²¹ McDowell 1996: 178.

Gadamer's remarkable (as he says) discussion of the human mode of life, and Aristotle's classic discussion of ethics and practical wisdom – approaches that do not shy away from the messy nature of human interaction, be it in language, thought, or action. But rather than following in their steps, McDowell limits himself to a selective rehearsal of some of the points he finds useful in bringing forth a stripped-down notion of second nature – at the same time as he claims that the reason Kant could not see things clearly was because he lacked a “seriously exploitable”¹²², or “pregnant notion of second nature [which] explains why the right conception of experience cannot find a firm position in his thinking.”¹²³ However, even if the charge he raises against Kant is that he does not even conceive of the *idea* of a second nature, the point seems to bear noticing: in the absence of a more detailed discussion of these notions, how ‘seriously exploitable’ is McDowell’s own notion of second nature?

This seems to bring the discussion in line with a criticism that was raised earlier, for whereas McDowell’s central concepts seems mired in issues that has been the topic of constructive philosophy since the dawn of philosophy, Wittgenstein’s focus on “particularistic and self-consciously non-theoretical investigation of “language-games”¹²⁴, as Friedman puts it, seems more suited to a quietist approach. Perhaps is McDowell’s engagement with the tradition, and the richness of the concepts he invokes, impeding the adoption of a quietist attitude, as Friedman suggests? In what sense can questions on how we enter a language – “which serves as a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what”¹²⁵ – and, as McDowell ends by saying, “is the same thing as acquiring a mind, the capacity to think and act intentionally”¹²⁶, be left to quietude? At times, McDowell comes close to conceding the obligation for further clarification that such rich concepts seem to carry. In the penultimate section we find him raising the selfsame question that bothered us to begin with. As he says, “How has it come about that there are animals that possess spontaneity of understanding? This is a perfectly good question.”¹²⁷ The “good questions

¹²² For this phrasing, see McDowell 1996: 111.

¹²³ McDowell 1996: 97.

¹²⁴ Friedmann 2002: 48.

¹²⁵ McDowell 1996: 126.

¹²⁶ McDowell 1996: 126.

¹²⁷ McDowell 1996: 123.

we can raise in the evolutionary context”, comes, as he says, “as close as good questions can to the philosophical questions I want to exorcize.”¹²⁸ But again, the rejection that this commits him to an elaboration of his idea of second nature comes swift. We must, as he says, be clear what we are doing,

“It would be one thing to give an evolutionary account of the fact that the normal human maturation includes the acquisition of second nature, which involves the responsiveness to meaning; it would be quite another thing to give a constitutive account of what responsiveness to meaning is. I have been granting that it is reasonable to look for an evolutionary story. That is not a concession to the sort of constructive philosophical account of meaning ... whose point would be to make the relevant sort of intelligibility safe for a naturalism without second nature. That is a misbegotten idea, and there is no comfort for it here.”¹²⁹

So are we then nevertheless not entitled a more detailed account of second nature? Is Friedman wrong in thinking that McDowell’s engagement with the philosophical tradition is incompatible with quietism? On the basis of a point that was made in the introduction to this thesis, holding McDowell accountable for a more detailed story about second nature seems clearly to be a misreading of what he says – a misreading that comes about by an insensitivity to what McDowell is up to. As we saw in the introduction, at one level of abstraction the question that governs McDowell’s inquiry is not epistemological, but directed at how we can be in touch with the world at all, thereby predating the epistemological question of how we can come to *know* about the world. Seen thus, what McDowell intends to make possible with his introduction of second nature (i.e. *not* an explanation of our epistemological standing in the world, but our rational, or world-directed standing *tout court*) makes us able to appreciate what he says on Wittgenstein, on how he thinks he can be entitled to quietism.

McDowell explicitly aligns his work with Wittgenstein’s later writings by saying that “I think naturalized platonism is a good way to understand what Wittgenstein is driving at there.”¹³⁰ In contrast to a common reading of Wittgenstein’s later writings, which holds that the spookiness of reasons conceived as facts independent of human communities (i.e. a rampant platonism) is countered by Wittgenstein by a communitarian or “social

¹²⁸ McDowell 1996: 124, footnote 12.

¹²⁹ McDowell 124.

¹³⁰ McDowell 1996: 92.

pragmatist” model of meaning¹³¹, McDowell charges that this makes unintelligible his endorsement of quietism. And quietism, he says,

“is not just a quirk of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, to be set aside while we proceed to read him as just another ordinary philosopher. The aspiration is not fantastic. The naturalism of second nature that I have been describing is precisely a shape of our thinking that would leave even the last dualism not seeming to call for constructive philosophy.”¹³²

Rather than querying how we can come to know, or what our knowledgeable standing consists in, which would lead us into a complex discussion of all the aspects comprising the human epistemological standing, the question is simpler, leaner, only requiring that we see how there can be *room* for reason or intentionality in nature, how such a possibility can be *conceived*. It seems therefore that the demand for further elaboration of second nature is a misconception based on conflating McDowell’s question on how we can be directed towards the world with epistemology proper.

It is to a certain extent difficult to insist on further clarification from someone when the whole idea is that one is simply supposed to *see* the correct answer once all other seemingly plausible answers are wiped away. That no more is necessary than a gesture in the right direction, once the wholly negative undertaking of making everyone else come out with implausible views has been satisfyingly brought home. It is of course an open question whether that has been done, but at least McDowell thinks he can shovel Wright onto the scrap-pile of Mythists, while others of his critics assumes this position of their own free will, arguing that it is not a Myth. In the end, one cannot force McDowell to clarify views he thinks any attempts at explanation simply distorts, although, at times, he certainly appears to be a rather talkative quietist with a “theory” that has caused a great stir.

¹³¹ See McDowell 1996: 92-93.

¹³² McDowell 1996: 94-95.

Essay II. What is the Debate on Nonconceptual Content About?

I. Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years or so, philosophy of language and mind has witnessed a heated debate over whether or not perception has a nonconceptual content. The characterization, as paraphrased here, is taken from Christopher Peacocke¹³³ – himself one of the main contenders in the debate – and the issue, though with time a multifaceted and broad theme in it self, is often characterized as addressing the question whether or not there can be “mental states that can represent the world even though the bearers of those mental states does not possess the concepts required to specify their content.”¹³⁴ Opposing the ‘nonconceptualists,’ whose numbers count Michael Ayers, José Bermúdez, Tim Crane, Christopher Peacocke and Michael Tye, among a few, stand, most notably Bill Brewer, John McDowell, Alva Nöe, and Sonia Sedivy, who, in one way or the other, and in opposition to the nonconceptualists, can be said to hold the “widely held view that the way in which a creature can represent the world *is* determined by its conceptual capacities.”¹³⁵

The issue is decisive, as much else seems to follow from what stance one adopts towards it, and John McDowell strives ardently in his well-known book *Mind and World* to establish that, contrary to what the nonconceptualists claim, human sensory experiences already come imbued with conceptual content, and that they “have their content by virtue of the fact that conceptual capacities are operative in them.”¹³⁶ If there

¹³³ Peacocke 2001: 239.

¹³⁴ Bermúdez 2003. Bermúdez gives a variant of this characterisation in his 2007, where he says that; “Content is nonconceptual just if it can be attributed to a subject without *ipso facto* attributing to that subject mastery of the concepts required to specify it.” (Bermúdez 2007: 55-56). This way of characterizing the debate seems widely accepted, see for instance Michael Tye’s similar-sounding remark that: “To say that a mental content is nonconceptual is to say that its subject need not possess any of the concepts that we, as theorists, exercise when we state the correctness condition for that content” (quoted at Bermúdez 2007: 56), and Tim Crane’s description in the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, that states with nonconceptual content “represent the world without the subject having to possess the concepts which characterize their contents.” (Crane 1998) T. M. Crowther (2006), however, has criticised the definition for only capturing *one* of two ways in which one can characterize the claim that there can be such a thing as a nonconceptual content.

¹³⁵ Bermúdez 2003 (my emphasis).

¹³⁶ McDowell 1996: 66.

is at all a nonconceptual-component in our perceptual experiences, the idea seems to be, it is not necessary in order to explain the content of those sensory experiences.¹³⁷

Although these brief truncated remarks may suffice to give a minimal, or first approximation of *where* the conceptualist and nonconceptualists disagree – drawing up the fault line so to speak, which separates the conceptualists and nonconceptualists – they provide little, however, on what the idea of a nonconceptual content *is*. In spite of its centrality, the question of what is meant by a nonconceptual content remains highly disputed and has resulted in a recent flurry of articles which seeks to address the issue. Robert Stalnaker is in just this errand in his paper “What Might Nonconceptual Content Be?”, where he, in the opening lines of the essay asks with an air of exasperation: “what do these philosophers mean by “nonconceptual content”, and its contrast “conceptual content”?”¹³⁸. Alex Byrne joins in, almost verbatim, by questioning what a conceptual content is, “and how is it different from nonconceptual content?”¹³⁹, while the felt obligation to first define *what* he’s about to discuss similarly compels Richard Heck to “say a few words about how [he] understand[s] the claim that perceptual content is nonconceptual”¹⁴⁰. And the list goes on: almost everyone entering the debate seems to feel implored to say something about what they take nonconceptual content to be before delivering their views on whether or not there can be such a content. If they don’t necessarily agree on the substance of the matter, they do agree that greater clarity is needed – although the increase in interest does not seem to have provided the illuminating light needed. On the contrary, as Bermúdez says in one of the latest articles to appear, “the debate has become increasingly murky as it has become increasingly ramified. ... Even worse, significant parts of the discussion are somewhat confused.”¹⁴¹

Common to many of these attempts at clarifying the debate is that they approach the

¹³⁷ Although McDowell is commonly construed as the arch-critic of the idea of a nonconceptual content he does not deny *any* notion of a nonconceptual content flat out. However, the slim notion he allows is relegated to a rather dismal role as a theoretical construct in the cognitive sciences. As he says; “it is a recipe for trouble if we blur the distinction between the respectable theoretical role that non-conceptual content has in cognitive psychology, on the one hand, and, on the other, the notion of content that belongs with the capacities exercised in active self-conscious thinking – as if the contentfulness of our thoughts and conscious experiences could be understood as a welling-up to the surface of some of the content that a good psychological theory would attribute to goings-on in our cognitive machinery” (McDowell 1996: 55).

¹³⁸ Stalnaker 1998: 339.

¹³⁹ Byrne 2005: 1.

¹⁴⁰ Heck 2000: 484.

¹⁴¹ Bermúdez 2007: 55.

question by labouring a conceptual distinction *within* the nonconceptual position, arguing that one can understand the claim that there is a nonconceptual content in two fundamentally different ways. On one understanding of the issue – ‘content nonconceptualism’ – the claim is that there can be two different *kinds* of *content* in experience: a conceptual and a nonconceptual. Jeff Speaks, following Richard Heck’s original terminology¹⁴², argues that, “The first sense of the claim says something about the sort of contents perceptions have: it claims that those contents have a certain monadic property, the property of being nonconceptual.”¹⁴³ The problem is, as he rightly points out, to determine what this property is: what the difference in kind between that content which can be characterised as nonconceptual and that which is said to be conceptual amounts to. Although Speaks speculates that it might be that “the constituents of the contents of beliefs [or more generally, propositional attitudes] are concepts or Fregean senses, whereas the constituents of the contents of perceptions are objects and properties,”¹⁴⁴ he does not go any further, arguing that we can ‘bypass’ the enquiry into precisely what this difference in content resides in by simply “defining the thesis of the proponent of this kind of nonconceptual content in terms of a difference in kind between the contents of perceptions and the contents of “conceptual” states like beliefs and thoughts.”¹⁴⁵ In brief, ‘content nonconceptualism’, or in Speaks terminology, the idea that there may be an ‘absolute nonconceptual content’, can be summarised as the idea that:

“A mental state has absolutely nonconceptual content if and only if that mental state has a different kind of content than do beliefs, thoughts, and so on.”¹⁴⁶

However, it has more recently been argued that there may in addition be a second way to characterise the debate, which does not attribute that which is claimed to be nonconceptual to the content of experience, but instead places the locus of the discussion – what it is that, arguably at least, may be nonconceptual – on the possibility (or impossibility) of nonconceptual mental *states*. According to proponents of ‘state

¹⁴² Heck is generally recognized to have introduced the distinction between ‘content’ and ‘state’ nonconceptualism in his article from 2000.

¹⁴³ Speaks 2005: 359.

¹⁴⁴ Speaks 2005: 359.

¹⁴⁵ Speaks 2005: 359.

¹⁴⁶ Speaks 2005: 360.

nonconceptualism’, “there is no reason [to think] that perceptions cannot have the same sort of things as their contents [as beliefs and other propositional attitudes]; it is just that the contents of a thinker’s perceptual states can, while the content of her beliefs cannot, involve concepts she does not possess.”¹⁴⁷

The ‘state view’ thereby leaves room for the idea that there may be two different kinds of mental states, which Heck calls ‘concept-dependent’ and ‘concept-independent’, with the same content. This means – or so I take it at least – that being in a certain mental state, e.g. that of perceiving the famous and well-worn cat on the mat is to be in a state with the same content as, say, believing the cat to be on the mat. The difference between the two states is that the second is a propositional attitude while the first is not, and while having a propositional attitude demands that the possessor of the state be in possession of the concepts necessary to specify the content of that attitude in order to *be* in that mental state¹⁴⁸, the same content – according to the proponents of the state view – can feature in a state of (merely) perceiving without thereby demanding of the perceiver that she possesses the concepts necessary to specify the content of her perception. Perceiving, it seems, is, according to ‘state nonconceptualism’, a nonconceptual state *par excellence*, and – to rub it in – it differs from ‘content nonconceptualism’, not in that it takes experience to have a different content than belief but in maintaining that a perceiver and a believer can be variously related to *the same* content through *concept-independent* and *concept-dependent* states respectively.

However, and as the preceding discussion seems to imply, there has been a certain

¹⁴⁷ Heck 2000: 485. Unfortunately, Heck’s original distinction seems somewhat ambiguous as it brings in the notion of ‘content’ into a definition of what is supposed to emphasise the role of *states*. “Putting the distinction more hygienically”, as Alex Byrne says, in order to eliminate all risk of conflating the ‘state view’ with ‘content nonconceptualism’: “a state M with content p is a *nonconceptual state* iff it is possible to be in M without possessing all the concepts that characterize p.” (Byrne 2005: 4.) However, it should be emphasised that Byrne does not intend this as a critique of Heck, which he credits for ‘the useful state-content distinction’, but of others, such as Tim Crane, Michael Martin and Michael Tye, which he accuses of not maintain a proper distinction between the two versions of nonconceptualism.

¹⁴⁸ I take this to be a widely accepted claim. As Tim Crane says: “Now it is a commonplace that the contents of beliefs and the other propositional attitudes involve concepts.” (Crane 1992b: 136.). See also Stephen Neale (1998: 1) for the same claim. This position is called ‘belief conceptualism’ by Susanna Siegel, and, she argues, is endorsed by a number of philosophers, including nonconceptualists such as Michael Martin and Fred Dretske (see Siegel: 2008). Bermúdez refers to the idea as the widely held idea of a ‘conceptual constraint’, which he defines as the thought, that: “Specifications of the content of a sentence or propositional attitude should only employ concepts possessed by the utterer or thinker.” (Bermúdez and Cahen 2008).

amount of infighting between the advocates of nonconceptualism over which of the two views should be seen as primary. In his paper on nonconceptualism, where Heck introduces the distinction between a ‘state’ view and a ‘content’ view to the debate, he goes so far as to say that he “suspects the state view [to be] indefensible – even incoherent if coupled with the claim that the contents of belief are conceptual”¹⁴⁹. Bermúdez seems similarly unimpressed by the ‘state’ view in his original entry on nonconceptual content for the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, where he curtly mentions the ‘state’ view towards the end of his introduction before proclaiming that “although it has been suggested (Byrne forthcoming) that the "state" view of nonconceptual content should be taken as primary, I will principally be discussing the "content" view in this article.”¹⁵⁰ In the revised edition of the entry, co-edited with Aron Cahen, they spend a lot more space on the ‘state’ view, having inserted a long section entitled “An important distinction: State vs. content nonconceptualism”, but in the end Bermúdez and Cahen remains equally unconvinced by the prospects of the ‘state’ view, lashing out against the founding distinction in ‘state’ nonconceptualism between concept-dependent and concept-independent states, by arguing that:

“The difficulty ... with the “state” view is that it is unclear what basis there might be for a distinction between concept-dependent and concept-independent state types *other than the distinctive contents of these states*. That is, the “state” view owes us some account of why some states, such as the propositional attitudes, are concept-dependent, whereas other states, such as perceptual states, are concept-independent.”¹⁵¹

York H. Gunther, in his introduction to a collection of texts on nonconceptual content joins the sceptical ranks, by arguing that;

“Occasionally, participants in this debate speak about the conceptuality or nonconceptuality of intentional *states* rather than *contents*, using locutions like “conceptual state” or “nonconceptual

¹⁴⁹ Heck 2000: footnote 6.

¹⁵⁰ Bermúdez 2003.

¹⁵¹ Bermúdez and Cahen 2008, my emphasis. The rest of the paragraph goes: “It seems that a natural explanation for why perceptual states, but not propositional attitudes, are concept-independent is that perceptual states differ from propositional attitudes in the types of contents that are involved. This explanation is not available if we hold that perception and the propositional attitudes have contents of the same type.”

representation.” As I hope is clear, the debate between conceptualists and nonconceptualists concerns the kind of content such states bear, not, strictly speaking, the kinds of states (representations, attitudes, etc.) that they are.”¹⁵²

These sceptical remarks stands in sharp contrast to those who, like Stalnaker, argue explicitly for perceiving the ‘state’ view as primary – with Stalnaker ending his essay by claiming that, in fact, *all* content should be viewed as nonconceptual in this sense.¹⁵³ Speaks, on his side, is similarly baffled by what he sees as Heck’s undefended claim that the state view might be indefensible or incoherent,¹⁵⁴ and in spite of some misgivings, the distinction between a ‘content’ version and a ‘state’ version of nonconceptualism seems to have established itself in today’s discussion on nonconceptual content.

However, the concern with – as we may perhaps put it – how best to *formally*¹⁵⁵ characterise the claim that there can be such a thing as a nonconceptual content has obscured a more fundamental question, namely; what the debate on nonconceptual content is *about*. The distinction between these two questions surfaces, although no more than superficially, in Bermúdez and Cahen’s encyclopaedia entry, where they open the entry by noting that the,

“basic idea has been developed in different ways and applied to different categories of mental states. Not all of these developments and applications are consistent with each other, but each offers a challenge to the widely held view that the way a creature can represent the world is determined by its conceptual capacities.”¹⁵⁶

Although they note that the idea of a nonconceptual content has been developed in ways which might not be consistent with each other, and go on to organize their discussion of nonconceptualism in subsections according to the categories, or areas, at which the notion of a nonconceptual content has been pressed; in adult perception, in

¹⁵² Gunther 2003: footnote 4.

¹⁵³ See Stalnaker 1998: 352.

¹⁵⁴ See Speaks 2005: footnote 4.

¹⁵⁵ As Bermúdez says in an earlier article: “There are two different levels at which a characterization of nonconceptual content needs to be given. First, there is the *formal* level specifying the difference between conceptual and nonconceptual content. What are the general features that distinguish a conceptual content from a nonconceptual content? Second, there is the level at which a substantive theory of nonconceptual content is given.” (Bermúdez 1995: 336, my emphasis). See also footnote 29, below.

¹⁵⁶ Bermúdez and Cahen: 2008.

representational states at the subpersonal level, and in representational states of non-human animals and human infants, any discussion of what groups these very different developments under one common heading – what makes them all a case of pressing the idea of a ‘nonconceptual content’ – is lacking. However, without a clear sense that they are all pressing the same idea, there is nothing that guarantees that discussions on the nonconceptual content of subpersonal states can be juxtaposed with discussions on nonconceptual content in perception. Most likely, it seems, the various developments of the idea of a nonconceptual content are *not* pressing a unified idea, which makes it even more important to specify *what* one takes the debate to be about, before launching an attack, or defence, of nonconceptualism.

Robert Stalnaker seems to air a similar complaint when he, in the extension of the exclamation above, concedes that; “it is not clear to me that the different philosophers using this term [i.e. nonconceptual content] mean the same thing by it.”¹⁵⁷ He claims to be puzzled by what the different philosophers partaking in the debate say, and confesses to having:

“the impression that their arguments are being guided, on both sides, by conceptions of content and its role in the explanation of perception and thought that have underlying presuppositions that I don’t share, and don’t fully understand.”¹⁵⁸

However, rather than to “ferret out those presuppositions by detailed examination of the texts”¹⁵⁹ he says that he intends to spell out his own assumptions and ask how, based on these assumptions, “a distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual *might* be drawn”¹⁶⁰. While this is perhaps a tempting or even natural approach for anyone faced with a debate whose assumptions seem inherently shrouded in the dark, it is nevertheless unfortunate. For as long as these underlying assumptions on what one takes the debate to be about – what one takes the import of nonconceptual content to be – remains hidden and segregated from the question on what nonconceptual content *is*, it is not at all clear that the latter question *makes any sense*. Stalnaker’s contribution might be honest, in that

¹⁵⁷ Stalnaker 1998: 339.

¹⁵⁸ Stalnaker 1998: 340.

¹⁵⁹ Stalnaker 1998: 340.

¹⁶⁰ Stalnaker 1998: 340 (my emphasis).

he at least spells out in more detail than most what *he* takes nonconceptual content to be. But if we are interested in the question of whether or not there can be a nonconceptual content, it seems that we are, *pace* Stalnaker, obliged to ‘ferret’ out some of the underlying assumptions that populate the debate – to ask what is meant by a nonconceptual content – in order to be able to ask the further question: given that *this* is what the debate is about, can there be such a thing as a nonconceptual content?

While this may seem trivially true, I believe there has been far too little perceptivity in the debate on nonconceptual content to the importance of pinning down the scope of the debate.¹⁶¹ A few straws in the wind should nevertheless be mentioned, as the difficulty seems, with time, to have begun to make its presence known in the debate. T. M. Crowther in particular, seems to suggest an interesting and fruitful way of carving up the messy landscape. In his “Two conceptions of Conceptualism and Nonconceptualism” he says that:

“My aim here is not to offer new arguments for or against non-conceptualism, but to work towards a better understanding of precisely what is at issue between nonconceptualists and their conceptualist opponents. Nonconceptualism and conceptualism are often assumed to be well-defined theoretical approaches that each constitute unitary claims about the contents of experience. I aim to show that this assumption is mistaken.”¹⁶²

In doing so Crowther makes a distinction, which may at first look like a reiteration of the ‘state-content’ distinction, but which in fact provides a more helpful way of placing some of the suggestions that populate the debate. In the lead-up to the distinction, however, Crowther makes two claims about the debate, which helps to clarify the common ground in between conceptualists and nonconceptualists; *firstly*, that, “The neutral notion of content at issue in the debate between conceptualists and

¹⁶¹ In addition to T. M. Crowther’s suggestion developed below, Bermúdez appears to draw up a distinction between a formal and a substantive level in the discussion on nonconceptual content (see footnote 23 above). However, he makes very little of the distinction, limiting himself to a few vague speculations that, as he says, “if ... the formal notion of nonconceptual content has applications in domains other than perceptual experience, there is no reason to think that such domains will require the same substantive theory of nonconceptual content as perceptual experience. (In fact ... a teleological theory of content [as contrasted with Peacocke’s ‘positioned scenarios’] may well be more applicable in the domain of subpersonal computational states.” (Bermúdez 1995: 337.)

¹⁶² Crowther 2006: 246.

nonconceptualists is of the truth-evaluable content of perceptual experience.”¹⁶³ And *secondly*, that “The debate about the truth-evaluable content of perceptual experience takes place against a broad background of agreement that accounting for the cognitive significance of beliefs, thoughts and judgements requires understanding their contents along Fregean lines; as consisting of concepts.”¹⁶⁴ *One* way of addressing the debate therefore, would be to query whether or not this requirement also applies to the truth-evaluable content of perceptual experiences. Or as Crowther says,

“Suppose a set of circumstances in which a subject is undergoing a perceptual experience with a content, *p*. One question one might ask of such a set of circumstances is, ‘Is *p* composed of concepts?’ where *p* is composed of concepts if and only if *p* is built up exclusively from Fregean senses.”¹⁶⁵

And as Crowther adds, “That there is a constituent of *p* which is not a Fregean sense will be sufficient for *p* to lack exclusively conceptual structure.”¹⁶⁶ To pose the question this way would be to understand the debate on nonconceptual content to be a debate on the *compositionality* of the content of perceptual experiences.¹⁶⁷ And according to Crowther, this is the conception of the debate which is at stake between McDowell and Christopher Peacocke.

A second way of addressing the debate “concerns the relation between a subject’s undergoing the kind of episode that he does when he has an experience with the content *p*, and his possession of certain conceptual skills.”¹⁶⁸ Crowther defines this as the *possessional* question about nonconceptual content, and says that,

“What this second question brings into focus is not the nature of the constituents of the truth-evaluable content. Rather, what’s at issue here is what it is for a subject to be related towards that truth-evaluable content in perceptual experience, and whether a condition of that relation is a grasp of certain ways of

¹⁶³ Crowther 2006: 247.

¹⁶⁴ Crowther 2006: 247-48.

¹⁶⁵ Crowther 2006: 249. Crowther places the question on a line of its own, but for presentational matters I have placed it on the same line as the rest of the quote.

¹⁶⁶ Crowther 2006: 250.

¹⁶⁷ Crowther draws an instructive distinction in this regard, saying that: “If the content of experience is a Fregean Thought, then its content is conceptual in the compositional sense. The paradigmatic nonconceptual content, in this sense, is a Russellian proposition, a structure consisting of objects, properties, and relations, not of senses. But various kinds of non-Russellian contents can also satisfy this criterion on being nonconceptual.” (Crowther 2006: 250)

¹⁶⁸ Crowther 2006: 251.

thinking.”¹⁶⁹

On the face of it, this way of dissecting the landscape resembles the ‘state-content’ dichotomy, but Crowther’s distinction allows a certain amount of room and flexibility that does not come out on the two-dimensional ‘state-content’ dichotomy, in which the debate is construed as *either* about whether or not one needs to possess concepts to entertain an experience, *or*, whether or not the content of that experience is conceptually structured. In Crowther’s schema, on the other hand, there is room for positions that *combine* conceptualism on the one area with nonconceptualism on the other. At the extremities of the schema, we have conceptualism about composition combined with conceptualism about possession – *pure* conceptualism, which Crowther labels P1 – and *pure* nonconceptualism; nonconceptualism about both composition and possession, Crowther’s alternative P2. But we can also conceive of intermediate positions: on a third alternative, P3, which Crowther likens to that of Evans, the belief in a nonconceptual content, conceived compositionally, is combined with the demand that to entertain an experience with a content *p* we need to possess those concepts.¹⁷⁰ And on the fourth combination, P4, the belief in a compositionally conceptual content is combined with nonconceptualism with respect to possession. On such a view, “the content of the experience is conceptually composed, though it is not necessary for the subject to be undergoing an experience with such a content that they possess the concepts that characterize it.”¹⁷¹

It is interesting, as Crowther says, that, “Given the amount of discussion that the notion of nonconceptual content has generated ... these differences in the way that the subject-matter of debate between conceptualists and nonconceptualists is conceived have received little attention.”¹⁷² The lack of clarity on what the debate is about is of course an insensitivity that affects a proper understanding of *any* of the suggestions in play, but it is one that McDowell in particular seems to have had to suffer from, as he is, almost by default, attacked left and right for being the arch-defender of conceptualism. However, as long as no probing questions are asked as to what, precisely, McDowell takes himself to

¹⁶⁹ Crowther 2006: 252. Crowther attributes this view to Crane and Bermúdez.

¹⁷⁰ See Crowther 2006: 254.

¹⁷¹ Crowther 2006: 255.

¹⁷² Crowther 2006: 252.

defend, it seems that any critic is in danger of lashing out against a conceptualism that isn't really McDowell's. In the following I therefore propose to give a survey of a couple of the numerous suggestions that have been made in the debate, and to distinguish them from what I believe McDowell takes himself to be committed to. Although in no way meant to be exhaustive, I distinguish three different suggestions as to what the debate on nonconceptual content has been taken to be about: an approach centring on the possession-condition identified above; a 'cognitivist' approach; and what we may call an 'empiricist' approach to nonconceptual content.

The *first* of these is Tim Crane's suggestion, as it comes out in two short papers from 1988. In the "Waterfall Illusion", and in a reply to criticism by D. H. Mellor, the central argument for the existence of a nonconceptual content in perception is that perceptual content is not *revisable*, in the way in which beliefs is. Later, in a paper from 1992, this is refined into the claim that perceptual content is not *inferentially* related. But Crane's conception of what the debate is about seems at odds with that of McDowell: whereas Crane focuses on the non-inferentiality of mental *states* – and whether or not an experiencing subject needs to possess the relevant concepts in order to be in that state – McDowell sees the debate as being about the *content* of perceptual experience.

The *second* approach, which is José Bermúdez's suggestion, seems to approach the debate from an angle that McDowell explicitly defines as outside the scope of the discussion as he sees it: that there can be content at the subpersonal level. In doing so, Bermúdez commits the mistake, as McDowell sees it, of blurring the distinction between what is a respectable notion in cognitive psychology, and what takes place at the level of self-conscious thinking (see note 5 above). Although it is an increasingly popular conception of what the discussion is a discussion about, it seems to be fundamentally at odds with what McDowell takes to be at centre stage in the debate.

The *third* conception of what the debate is about, is developed by Michael Ayers, and criticised by Hannah Ginsborg. Ayers's approach is one of the few contributions to explicitly set out what he takes the debate to be about. However, nor does Ayers's claim that the discussion is a version of the old debate between empiricism and rationalism over whether experience comes prior to the formation of concepts, or vice versa, seem to capture what McDowell takes himself to be arguing. On the other hand, Hannah

Ginsborg, seems to my mind to come closer to a characterisation of the debate as McDowell sees it than she actually realizes.

I begin, however, by sketching the early beginnings of the discussion with its origin in Gareth Evans's work. As will become clear, McDowell's conception of what is at stake in the debate on nonconceptual content is the suggestion – central in Evans's *The Varieties of Reference* – that our conceptual apparatus takes us from a nonconceptual content in perception, to a conceptualized belief. It is primarily *this* view McDowell attempts to address in *Mind and World*, and it is in opposition to Evans's suggestion that we should understand McDowell's claim that our experience is already conceptual.

II. *The early beginnings: Evans*

The notion of a nonconceptual content was first introduced by Gareth Evans, in his seminal work *The Varieties of Reference* from 1982.¹⁷³ In discussing the relation between perception and judgement Evans appears to deny that the two have a common content, saying, in a much quoted passage, that:

“The informational states which a subject acquires through perception are *non-conceptual*, or *non-conceptualized*. Judgements *based upon* such states necessarily involves conceptualization ... the process of conceptualization or judgement takes the subject from his being in one kind of informational state (with a content of a certain kind, namely, non-conceptual content) to his being in another kind of cognitive state (with a content of a different kind, namely, conceptual content).”¹⁷⁴

One of Evans's main concerns throughout his short philosophical career seems to have been with explaining how there can be object-directed thoughts, and at the heart of Evans's philosophy was, according to Martin Davies, a dissatisfaction with both the description theory and the causal theory of reference.¹⁷⁵ According to Davies, Evans claimed that the description theory was build on a “flawed account of what is involved in

¹⁷³ Precursors in the philosophy of perception and cognitive science, had, according to Bermúdez and Cahen (2008), appeared in the works of Fred Dretske and Stephen Stich, but Bermúdez and Cahen credit Evans for being the first to explicitly introduce the notion to analytic philosophy.

¹⁷⁴ Evans 1982: 227 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷⁵ As Davies says, “Although *The Varieties of Reference* begins and ends with philosophy of language (returning to the topic of names and name-using practices in its final chapter), the central chapters address the issue of thoughts directed toward particular objects.” (Davies 2006: 2)

thought directed toward a particular object”¹⁷⁶, and the fact that a name may change its reference over time made him similarly argue that “a bare causal connection is not sufficient to underwrite reference.”¹⁷⁷ The deficiency Evans found in the philosophy of language also found its counterpart in the philosophy of mind: “here as in philosophy of language, [Evans was concerned] that causal theories were liable to be insufficiently demanding”¹⁷⁸, unable to secure a relation between thought and object.

Inspired by Russell’s Principle that I can have an object-directed thought only when I am acquainted with the object of my thought – and as Russell said, “I am *acquainted* with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e., when I am directly aware of the object itself”¹⁷⁹ – Evans developed an account of object-directed thought, although with a less stringent version of Russell’s Principle, in which “presently perceiving the object, being able to recognise it, knowing discriminating facts about it”¹⁸⁰ sufficed to meet its requirement. In relaxing the requirement, Evans “maintained that a subject may think about a particular object in virtue of standing in a contextual relation to it and without being able to frame any description that the object uniquely satisfies.”¹⁸¹ Whereas under Russell’s construal, a thinker would be related to an object only by meeting the principle of acquaintance, on Evans’s account, as Davies puts it, “a thinker’s Idea of an object depends on an information-link between the thinker and the object”¹⁸².

Important for our concern, however, is that Evans saw these ‘information links’ as primitive, not explicable in terms of belief or other conceptual states¹⁸³, and so an information link would act as a bridge, taking a conceptually endowed perceiver¹⁸⁴ from an informational state with a nonconceptual content to another kind of cognitive state

¹⁷⁶ Davies 2006: 1. See also Evans (1985: 3-6), where he criticises two versions of the description theory; “The stronger thesis (that the Description Theorist’s conditions are sufficient) is outrageous” (Evans 1985: 3), and a weaker thesis, which says that “some descriptive identification is necessary for a speaker to denote something ... but I too think it is false.” (Evans 1985: 3).

¹⁷⁷ Davies 2006: 1.

¹⁷⁸ Davies 2006: 2.

¹⁷⁹ Russell 1918/1953: 197.

¹⁸⁰ Davies 2006: 3.

¹⁸¹ Davies 2006: 1.

¹⁸² Davies 2006: 3.

¹⁸³ “In general, it seems to me preferable to take the notion of *being in an informational state with such-and-such a content* as a primitive notion for philosophy, rather than to attempt to characterise it in terms of belief.” (Evans 1982: 123, emphasis in original.)

¹⁸⁴ As Evans says, and which will be important in relation to McDowell “we arrive at a conscious perceptual experience when sensory input ... serves as the input to a *thinking, concept-applying, and reasoning system*” (Evans 1982: 158.)

with a conceptual content, as we saw above. But in giving an explanation of the relation between a perceptual state, and a conceptual state, such as a belief or judgement, Evans believed he had an explanation of how we can have object directed thoughts.¹⁸⁵

However, while Evans's ideas have acted as a starting point and inspiration for later discussions on nonconceptual content, his own stand on the issue – how he understood the notion – was, according to most interpreters, not very clear. In particular, and in line with the dominant concern of the debate, whether he meant to press the 'state' view or the 'content' view, as described above, seems difficult to untangle. Jeff Speaks, after admitting that Evans is not clear on the issue, nevertheless goes on to argue that the above-quoted passage from *The Varieties of Reference* indicates that Evans at least supported a version of nonconceptualism, which emphasises that perception has a different *kind of content* to conceptual states such as belief states.¹⁸⁶ Richard Heck on the other hand, develops elements of Evans's view as suggesting a 'state' nonconceptualism, although he adds that "the text is simply too thin to support the attribution to him of *any* specific, developed view that perceptual content is nonconceptual."¹⁸⁷ Others again, like Bermúdez and Cahen, are even more sceptical of Evans's nonconceptualist aspirations:

"Evans is not always clear whether he understands nonconceptual content to be a personal level or a subpersonal level phenomenon. And, in fact, it seems that Evans's conception of nonconceptual content is in at least one important way deeply antithetical to that currently discussed. Whereas much contemporary discussion of nonconceptual content is focused on the content of *conscious* perceptual states, it looks very much as if Evans understands perceptual states with nonconceptual content as being *non-conscious* until the subject's conceptual abilities are brought to bear on them."¹⁸⁸

Evans's characterization of nonconceptual content as a pre-conceptualised input to a concept-applying mechanism makes the claim that Evans conceives of nonconceptual content as non-conscious content at least not wholly implausible. But one may wonder why Bermúdez and Cahen judge from this that Evans's understanding of the nonconceptual is *antithetical* to the issue as it is discussed today? As we saw above,

¹⁸⁵ I do not intend this as a satisfying account of Evans's complex thinking on object-directed thought, but as a way of sketching the role nonconceptual content appears to play in his thinking.

¹⁸⁶ See Speaks 2005: footnote 2.

¹⁸⁷ Heck 2000: 484.

¹⁸⁸ Bermúdez and Cahen 2008.

Bermúdez and Cahen themselves include among those areas where the idea of a nonconceptual content has been pressed, two, broadly defined, areas which seem – at least intuitively – to focus on non-conscious aspects of our mental lives. In addition to pressing the claim that there is a nonconceptual content in perception, philosophers have, they tell us, argued for a nonconceptual content, firstly, in explaining the ‘content of subpersonal representational states’, and secondly, in “explaining the behaviour of certain non-human animals and of pre-conceptual human infants.”¹⁸⁹

In debating the first of these, tacit knowledge of the rules of syntax as well as representational states postulated in computational theories of vision have been taken as examples of representational content where the speaker or the perceiver need not possess the concepts which would be used to describe the content of those states under a canonical description.¹⁹⁰ Although ‘tacit knowledge’ is a contentious philosophical notion, there is at least one way in which it can be understood as a kind of knowledge that is non-consciously possessed, and on this prevalent view, first propagated by Chomsky, *that* is how we should think of our use of grammatical rules in speaking, or of the workings of our visual system in perceiving.¹⁹¹ Or, in exploring the second of the above-mentioned areas: by holding a very relaxed notion of concept-possession one could argue that “possessing a given concept simply requires being able to make justified judgments involving that concept rather than being able to justify judgments involving that concept”¹⁹² – as one could claim, for instance, that being able to discriminate red from green objects qualifies as possessing the concepts ‘red’ and ‘green’. This way one could maintain a *conceptualism* in explaining the behaviour of non-human animals and pre-conceptual human infants, but the grip on the concepts involved may be so weak – even

¹⁸⁹ Bermúdez and Cahen 2008.

¹⁹⁰ The notion of a canonical description is often referred to Adrian Cussins, who says that: “Something is canonically characterised (within a theory) if, and only if, it is characterised in terms of the properties which the theory takes to be essential to it. A game of football, for example, is canonically characterised, in the Football Association, in terms of the notions employed in the rules of the game, not in terms of temporal patterns of disruption to the playing field.” (Cussins 1990: footnote 24.)

¹⁹¹ As Martin Davies says on Chomsky’s notion of a ‘tacit knowledge’: “Chomsky’s claim that ordinary speakers possess tacit knowledge of a generative grammar for their language stands as the canonical example of appeal to the cognitive unconscious” (Davies 2005: 15).

¹⁹² Bermúdez and Cahen do not put this in terms of a ‘relaxed notion of concept-possession’. Bermúdez and Cahen 2008.

in adult humans, as McDowell's chicken sexers example illustrates¹⁹³ – as to border on the subconscious.¹⁹⁴ But if both of these broadly defined areas intuitively seem to be about, or at the very minimum, deal with aspects of our mental lives which border onto the non-conscious, one might wonder why Bermúdez and Cahen thinks Evans's conception of a nonconceptual content is antithetical to the way today's discussion of the issue is conducted. Why couldn't Evans's view, with its apparent focus on the non-conscious, fit neatly into one of these categories?

However, the reason for evoking the idea of a nonconceptual content in subpersonal representational states and in the explanation of non-human and pre-conceptual human behaviour, is *not* "that language-users are not aware of the beliefs in question"¹⁹⁵ – i.e., that the belief that they are applying the correct grammatical rules, or that the visual system works the way it does, are non-conscious beliefs, and *therefore* nonconceptual. It is not *that* which makes them nonconceptual. As Bermúdez and Cahen goes on to argue: there might be other non-conscious but nevertheless *concept-dependent* beliefs, which proves that the issue of a conceptual versus a nonconceptual content is not that of a conscious versus a non-conscious content.¹⁹⁶ The reason for pressing a nonconceptual content in these areas is rather that in the case of the speakers' tacit knowledge of linguistic rules, their "representations of the linguistic rules are *inferentially insulated* from the rest of their beliefs and propositional attitudes, in a way that is fundamentally

¹⁹³ Chicken sexers are "experts [that can] declare a chic with which they are present "Male" or "Female" without knowing how they do it, and even without claiming that the two sexes look different to them." (Stroud 2002: 90)

¹⁹⁴ Alva Noë seems to make a suggestion along these lines in his *Action in Perception*. As he says: "one of the main themes of this book has been that to perceive you must have sensory stimulation *that you understand*. But unlike Kant and the tradition spawned by him, the form of understanding I have taken as basic is *sensorimotor* understanding. Mere sensory stimulation *becomes* experience with world-presenting content *thanks to* the perceiver's sensorimotor skills. In this chapter I propose that we think of sensorimotor skills as themselves conceptual, or "proto-conceptual" skills." (Noë 2004: 183.) He goes on to say that "sensorimotor "concepts" are obviously the sort of skill that nonlinguistic animals and infants can possess, so the argument from animals gain no ground." (Noë 2004: 183-84). This seems to be another example of how diverse the debate on nonconceptual content, and what it is about, has become: Noë seems clearly to operate with a notion of "concept", or concept-possession, which is far weaker than McDowell, and seems therefore to perceive the debate on nonconceptual content as being about something rather different from McDowell.

¹⁹⁵ Bermúdez and Cahen 2008.

¹⁹⁶ As an example of a (often) non-conscious, but concept-dependent belief, Bermúdez and Cahen mention the belief that the earth revolves around the sun, which they say "requires that I possess the concepts of which its content is composed" (Bermúdez and Cahen 2008).

incompatible with the holistic nature of conceptual contents.”¹⁹⁷ The same can be claimed about the content of representational states postulated in computational theories of vision, and ultimately, it seems, about perceptual content itself. The content of all these states, it is argued, is nonconceptual because it is inferentially insulated from the content of other computational or perceptual states.

III. Crane: the argument from non-inferentiality

An early development of this interesting line of reasoning was introduced to the debate by Tim Crane, in a brief exchange with D. H. Mellor in 1988 over the “Waterfall Illusion”.¹⁹⁸ In the illusion, a stationary object both seems and seems not to be moving in the opposite direction of an immediately preceding observed movement – as may happen if one stares at a waterfall for a period of time, for then to move one’s gaze onto a stone on the riverbank (which then both seems and seems not to move upwards). In contrast to the well-known Müller-Lyer illusion, which “presents a conflict between *two* intentional states: the state of believing that the lines are the same length, and the state of the lines *looking to be* different lengths”¹⁹⁹, the Waterfall Illusion seems to present us with a “contradiction in the *one* content of one attitude.”²⁰⁰ It is “the content of the *experience itself* [which] is contradictory”²⁰¹. This poses, according to Crane, a problem for the claim that the content of perceptual experience is composed of concepts. For although the illusion rightfully *seems* to present us with a case where we have an experience with a concept (‘moving’) and its negation at the same time, this simply cannot be the case as it would lead to a contradiction in our conceptual schema, which, to echo Bermúdez, is fundamentally at odds with the holistic nature of all conceptual content. But as we *are* faced with a contradictory content (according to Crane), the illusion seems to present a “counterexample to the thesis that concepts are involved in the content of perceptual

¹⁹⁷ Bermúdez and Cahen 2008, my emphasis.

¹⁹⁸ See Crane 1988a, Mellor 1988 and Crane 1988b. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that an early *precursor* to the argument that nonconceptual content is non-inferential features in these papers by Crane. Crane’s initial suggestion is that there is a non-revisable, and thereby a nonconceptual, content in perception. However, this idea is later refined into the idea that there is a non-inferential, and hence nonconceptual content in perception. Here is a link to a demonstration of the waterfall illusion: http://www.michaelbach.de/ot/mot_adapt/index.html.

¹⁹⁹ Crane 1988a: 143.

²⁰⁰ Crane 1988a: 144.

²⁰¹ Crane 1988a: 144.

experience.”²⁰² Only by understanding the content of perception as nonconceptual can we avoid the incoherent conclusion that the content of the illusion is constituted by a contradictory pair of concepts.

Crane’s paper immediately spurred a response by Mellor, who disagreed with the lessons Crane drew from the illusion. Mellor argued that we are faced with two, and not one experience in the illusion, and that this creates two rivalling belief-dispositions where the one winning forth determines what we end up believing.²⁰³ This eludes the problem of the one contradictory content, but does so by evoking a dispositional theory of belief; a theory that has its own difficulties, among others how to explain the Müller-Lyer Illusion.²⁰⁴ It is in responding to Mellor’s dispositional analysis of perception that Crane first makes use of what can be said to be the argument from non-inferentiality in its most rudimentary form. While conceding a few points to Mellor, he politely disagrees with Mellor’s suggestion that a dispositional analysis can fully explain the illusion, or, as he puts it:

“How can the notion of an inclination to believe capture what is distinctive about the content of perception? In particular, how can it explain the general fact (of which the Waterfall Illusion is an illustration) that, unlike beliefs, the contents of one’s perceptual states cannot be *revised* in response to further evidence? If perceptions were simply inclinations to believe, one would expect that the inclination which ‘loses’ (in our case, that *a* is moving) would no longer be present to the mind.”²⁰⁵

²⁰² Crane 1988a: 145.

²⁰³ In encountering the illusion, Mellor argues that we are “inclined to believe that *Fa* while also being inclined to believe that $\sim Fa$. And that, I submit, is what happens in the Waterfall Illusion. There isn’t simply, as Crane claim, ‘a contradiction in the *one* content of one attitude’ (p. 144). Rather, we are conscious of seeing that *a* moves while also seeing that it doesn’t. One of these two perceptual experiences gives us the corresponding belief, say that *a* doesn’t move, which then suppresses the rival inclination to believe that it does.” Mellor 1988: 149.

²⁰⁴ I will not delve on Mellor’s suggested solution here as it relies on a belief-theory of perception, a theory that seems to have fallen somewhat out of favour among philosophers discussing perception. But a second reason for ignoring Mellor’s suggestion is that it does not seem particularly congenial to understanding McDowell’s argument against the possibility of a nonconceptual content. As Susanna Siegel argues: “Experience conceptualism and the same-content thesis go naturally with the views (discussed in Section 2.2 above) that link the content of experience to the contents of beliefs, either by identifying experiences with beliefs or with dispositions to form beliefs. However, McDowell (1994), Sedivy (1996) and Brewer (1999) endorse both theses while *denying that experiences and beliefs are linked in either of these ways*.” (Siegel 2008, my emphasis).

²⁰⁵ Crane 1988b: 151.

The non-revisability of perceptual content is presented as what makes it unwarranted to equate perception with dispositions to believe, and is that which, in 1988, seems to support Crane's argument that perceptual content is nonconceptual. However, a few years later the argument reappears in a more developed form – at which time the conclusion from 1988 is modified and we are told that, “Although perceptions are unrevisable, the conclusion that they have nonconceptual contents will not follow from this fact alone.”²⁰⁶ For there are other inferential relations, which as yet, we do not know if applies to perception or not.

The three inferential relations Crane identifies – all of which define beliefs, but which, according to Crane, do not apply to perception – are: *firstly*, the deductive inference from believing that *a* is *F*, and that *a* is *G*, to the belief that *a* is *F and G*. *Secondly*, the semantic relation inherent in belief, between “the belief that *p* ... and certain other beliefs that you *ought to have* if that belief is to have the content *p*.”²⁰⁷ And *thirdly*: the revisability of a belief in the light of other beliefs. Since, as Crane argues, it seems that; (1) there is no inference from perceiving that *a* is *F*, and a (later) perception that *a* is *G*, to the perception that *a* is *F and G*; (2) there are no further perceptions one *ought to have* on the basis of any perception; and (3) perceptions are not revisable in light of other perceptions, *none* of these inferential relations seems to hold for perception, and the conclusion that perception has a different kind of content follows.

The fact that Crane here seems to address the nature of perceptual states appears to indicate that he conceives the debate in terms of whether or not, in having an experience, we need to *possess* the concepts that characterise that experience – i.e. the possessional view characterised above – and in later works he explicitly couches characterizations of the debate on nonconceptual content in those terms.²⁰⁸ This makes Crane's view seem explainable within the ‘state-content’ distinction discussed above, and Crane is often mentioned as one of the first to have defended an approach that takes the central issue to be whether or not there can be mental *states* that are nonconceptual. However, there is a danger that dissecting the issue this way is too coarse – that it threatens to obscure that

²⁰⁶ Crane 1992b: 152.

²⁰⁷ Crane 1992b: 154.

²⁰⁸ Cf. his description in the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, quoted above in footnote 2, where he says that states with nonconceptual content “represent the world without the subject having to possess the concepts which characterize their contents.”

Crane's conception of the debate seems not really to be engaging with McDowell's conceptualism at all.²⁰⁹ If we apply Crowther's schema, however, the different conceptions on what the debate is about – how the suggestions seems to talk past each other by taking different stands on what the debate is about – come out clearer.

In seeing how Crane's suggestion bypasses the discussion as McDowell sees it, we are taken back to Evans. McDowell appears to take Evans as arguing for something like P3, which, as we saw above, is the combination of compositional nonconceptualism and possessional conceptualism. In setting out Evans's view for criticism he cites the passage with which we introduced Evans above, before reiterating the message in his own words as the claim that;

“Evans, then, identifies perceptual experiences as states of the informational system, possessing content that is non-conceptual. According to Evans, conceptual capacities are first brought into operation only when one makes a judgement of experience, and at that point *a different species of content* comes into play.”²¹⁰

However, in setting out Evans's position, McDowell seems at the same time to define what he takes the question to concern. It is *Evans's claim* that seems to be what McDowell takes the debate on nonconceptual content to be about: the claim that there is a different kind of content in perception than that found in beliefs and judgement – a suggestion, which he in *Mind and World* staunchly opposes. However, in taking that view, the *possessional* claim – that we need to possess the concepts *p* to entertain an experience with the content *p* – seems irrelevant to the debate on nonconceptual content; it simply does not seem to be part of what McDowell takes the debate to be about. As he says,

²⁰⁹ Crane does not himself explicitly address McDowell's view, but my point here is simply to draw attention to the fact that not every way in which the idea of a nonconceptual content can unproblematically be juxtaposed with other suggestions in the field. That the important work of defining what the debate is a debate about is wanting.

²¹⁰ McDowell 1996: 48 (my emphasis).

“Both Evans and I are committed to there being different stories to tell about perceptual goings-on in creatures with spontaneity and in creatures without it. In the one case we can apply the notion of experience, in a strict sense that connects it with conceptual capacities, and in the other case we cannot.”²¹¹

In essence, McDowell’s discussion is limited to the perceptual experiences of mature, adult concept-possessors, and he appears rather uninterested in the cognitive lives of animals and young children, as they do not entertain *experiences* as such. It is a *premise* in McDowell’s discussion that we stick to concept-possessors, as we are interested – not in whether someone needs to possess concepts to experience: that is baked into the definition of what it is to entertain an experience – but how to characterize the perceptual content concept-possessors entertain; whether or not it differs from the conceptual content of their beliefs.²¹² In Crowther’s schema, this makes McDowell a theorist who simply *assumes* what Crane takes to be the point of contention, as he focuses exclusively on the *content* of experience, finding the question of *possession* not to be at issue. It is only in construing the debate on a nonconceptual content as being about concept-possession that it would require us to take seriously the cognitive lives of animals and human infants – but as we are discussing the perceptual content of experiences of concept-possessors, we do not really need to worry about animal cognition. Or as McDowell says,

“We do not need to say that we have what mere animals have, non-conceptual content, and we have something else as well, since we can conceptualize that content and they cannot. Instead we say that we have what mere animals have, perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment, but we have it in

²¹¹ McDowell 1996: 63. Or, as he says somewhat earlier: “One straightforward response [to the problem of animal cognition] would be to conclude that the notion of experience needs to be completely detached from anything on the lines of the notion of spontaneity. Then we would not be committed to having different stories to tell about the sentient lives of rational and non-rational animals. My point is just that anyone who is tempted by this course cannot easily enrol Evans as an ally. In his picture as mine, the concept of experience has a restricted use, governed by a link of a broadly Kantian sort to what is in effect the idea of spontaneity.” (McDowell 1996: 50).

²¹² As we saw in Essay I, McDowell differentiates the evolutionary question on how humans have come to possess concepts, from the philosophical question on the perceptual content of concept-possessors. As we saw, McDowell argues that “It would be one thing to give an evolutionary account of the fact that normal human maturation includes the acquisition of a second nature; it would be quite another thing to give a constitutive account of what responsiveness to meaning is.” (McDowell 1996: 124.)

special form. Our perceptual sensitivity to our environment is taken up into the ambit of the faculty of spontaneity, which is what distinguishes us from them.”²¹³

In the end, it seems that what McDowell takes the claim he is making to boil down to, and what he takes to be at the centre of his disagreement with Evans, is whether we apply concepts *in* experience, or, as Evans claims, *on* a nonconceptual given. As he says, in a passage that I think sums up what McDowell takes the debate on nonconceptual content to be about:

“when we enjoy experience conceptual content are drawn on *in* receptivity, not *on* some supposedly prior deliverances of receptivity.”²¹⁴

That this is a different question than what Crane takes to be at stake in the debate becomes patent when Crane, in discussing ‘Intentionalism’ – a view that addresses the conscious character of mental states, and whether or not they are reducible to the *representational content* of those states, or its *entire intentional nature* (by which Crane means mode and content²¹⁵) – says that, the question on nonconceptual content “is not a

²¹³ McDowell 1996: 64. How can one understand McDowell’s claim that we have experiences that are like those of animals, but ‘in a special form’? Or in other words, the central claim that our experience is conceptual. Let me attempt an underdeveloped and sketchy analogy. Today’s computers operate on binary coded information – strings of zeroes and ones – but it is not implausible that future computers will have a different way of storing and processing information: a radically new way of storing information, which does not involve binary coded information. If such a way of processing information were to be found and a new processor construed, the old form of representing information would no longer be available to new computers (except through translation programmes). Although we share sensitivity to our surroundings with animals, our sensitivity comes in a special form – we have a different ‘processor’, so to speak, which operate on conceptual input, and so the more rudimentary sensitivity to our surroundings that animals have, are no longer open to us once we have acquired a second nature. Or, as McDowell ends *Mind and World* by saying, “acquiring a mind, the capacity to think and act intentionally” requires that we be “initiated into a [linguistic] tradition as it stands” (McDowell 1996: 126).

²¹⁴ McDowell 1996: 10.

²¹⁵ Crane describes the aim of his paper, saying that: “I will use the term *intentionalism* for the general thesis that the nature of a conscious mental state is determined by its intentionality. (Intentionalism is sometimes called *representationalism*; the difference is purely terminological. I prefer ‘intentionalism’.) There are a number of ways of developing this general thesis; in what follows I shall examine two of them. One is the view that the conscious character of a state of mind is determined by its intentional or *representational content*. The other is the view that the conscious character of a state of mind is determined by (what I shall call) its *entire intentional nature*. I shall argue for the superiority of the second view over the first.” (Crane 2007: 2). Later, we are told that: “The alternative way of developing the view that all mental states are intentional is what I call (following Chalmers 2004) *impure intentionalism*. This says that the phenomenal character of an experience is determined by its entire intentional nature: in particular, by its mode and its content” (Crane 2007: 14).

debate which needs to be settled in this context.”²¹⁶ For McDowell, taking the debate on nonconceptual content to be about *content* rather than *possession*, it seems that that *would* be the place to discuss conceptualism versus nonconceptualism.

However, if Crane’s suggestion targets a different issue in the philosophy of mind than what McDowell is discussing, what about the claim that there might be a nonconceptual content at the subpersonal level? How does that claim fare with McDowell’s conception of the debate as addressing the content of experience? On the face of it, it seems they are both questions directed at the content of experience, and that should make it possible to juxtapose them in a discussion over the nature of that content.

In fact, Crane’s early contribution to the debate in 1988 appears ambiguous between featuring as an argument for the non-inferentiality of *subpersonal computational states*, or as an argument meant to explain the non-inferential nature of the content of *perception*. Whereas he in the first of the two papers here mentioned seems to speak exclusively about the Waterfall Illusion in a way that places the discussion at the level of perceptual experience, he appears, in his reply to Mellor, to introduce additional elements that makes the case less clear. In the reply he seems to embrace a description of the issue in terms of subpersonal states of the perceptual system, arguing that:

“the picture of perception suggested by much recent work in the philosophy and psychology of perception (and to my mind, supported by the existence of the Waterfall Illusion) is that of the perceptual system as an *information processor*. ... The contents of the states of the perceptual system are, of course, *describable* (by a theorist) in terms of certain concepts, but the system does not *possess* those concepts. It is not a thinker or an agent, and has no propositional attitudes”²¹⁷

Although he here presses the discussion in terms of the possession condition, proceeding to say that it is the possession of concepts that mark the difference between “someone who has genuine beliefs (and other propositional attitudes) and a mere

²¹⁶ Crane 2007: 9. The whole passage goes: “Another question about intentional content is whether it is conceptual or non-conceptual. A state of mind has conceptual content when a subject needs to possess the concepts definitive of its content in order to be in that state. Some philosophers have claimed that certain experiences have non-conceptual content, and I agree. But it is not a debate which needs to be settled in this context.”

²¹⁷ Crane 1988b: 152 (emphasis in original).

information processor”²¹⁸, the way of drawing up the debate, with a distinction between states of the perceptual system and states of a perceiver, seems to open for the identification of a nonconceptual content at the subpersonal level of the perceptual system.

The issue of a nonconceptual content at the subpersonal level is again broached in Crane’s introduction to a volume on perception from 1992. Commenting on the recent development in the philosophy of mind, Crane notes that “Since the 1970s this area of philosophy has undergone important changes, and the most significant of these is the increased interest in the notions of *mental representation* and *content*.”²¹⁹ And, as he goes on to add, “This shift of interest ... has, as one might expect, had its effects on the philosophy of perception. One obvious effect is the now generally accepted assumption that perceptions have content”²²⁰. According to Crane, this development, and with it, the renewed interest in determining the nature of perceptual content springs, among other, from “the growth of cognitive science ... In particular, computational or information-processing models of the mental have suggested ways to approach ... traditional questions of the mind, [e.g.] how does the mind get ‘outside’ itself and represent external objects?”²²¹ But although this has spurred a renewed interest in, and lead to the development of new approaches to the study of mind and its content, this can only be a beginning. For as Crane says, “although it is right to say, with the informational theory, that experiences have contents, this is not to say very much. The notion of *content* is a philosophical term of art – so without an account of perceptual content, the informational theory is a mere promise.”²²² The following section addresses José Bermúdez’s attempts to give such an account, which directly couples the informational theory with the notion of a nonconceptual content, and what consequences this has for how the debate on nonconceptual content is perceived.

IV. *Cognitivist views on nonconceptual content*

According to Martin Davies, ‘the most striking difference’ between the early

²¹⁸ Crane 1988b: 152.

²¹⁹ Crane 1992a: 6.

²²⁰ Crane 1992a: 7.

²²¹ Crane 1992a: 6-7.

²²² Crane 1992a: 7.

introspectionist psychologies of the late 19th century and the cognitive psychology that developed in the 1950s and 60s, “is the latter’s appeal to unconscious mental states and processes.”²²³ After having started out as an experimental introspectionism, followed by decades of behaviourism, the “restauration of the mind as the proper subject matter of psychology came in the 1950s and amounted to a revolutionary end to the behaviourist era.”²²⁴ In the course of a decade, this new focus on the subconscious brought about some of the most lasting texts of cognitive science, such as Chomsky’s *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* and Jerry Fodor’s *Psychological Explanation: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Psychology*.

Among the early, influential works of cognitive science was also the publication of Daniel Dennett’s *Content and Consciousness*, in which Dennett draws up a distinction between a subpersonal and personal level of explanation. In Dennett’s seminal contribution, the distinction is drawn between descriptions of mental phenomena at a personal level, where we may speak of experiencing, acting subjects whose experiences and actions are described in terms of sensations, beliefs and intentions, and the subpersonal level, where these same phenomena are described in causal and mechanistic terms of the states of the brain and nervous system.

The idea that there is a subpersonal, causal-mechanistic level of explanation in our mental lives gave rise to the problem of how to explain the content of these states, and similarly, how to explain the relation between these subpersonal states and corresponding personal level states. Although it seems blatantly anachronistic not to accept causal-mechanistic explanations of mental phenomena such as pain and colour sensations at a subpersonal level, it is not thereby given what kind of content these subpersonal states have and how to connect them with a personal level explanation. The relation between the subpersonal and the personal brings out a complex cluster of questions on content and representation, and – congenial to our purpose – juxtaposes different ways of understanding the question about a possible nonconceptual content in experience.

To adopt McDowell’s words: the subpersonal informational system that Dennett draws up in *Content and Consciousness* is, “a physical mechanism, connected to its

²²³ Davies 2005: 3.

²²⁴ Davies 2005: 2.

surroundings by transducers that convert physical impacts from outside into events of the sort that the system can work on, and perhaps by transducers that convert the system's end products into physical interventions in the exterior."²²⁵ The subpersonal system is, as he goes on to paraphrase Dennett, "a syntactic engine, not a semantic engine."²²⁶ This description of the subpersonal as a syntactic engine had its roots in Chomsky's radical idea that there are "cognitive states that are inaccessible to consciousness, states of tacit knowledge of syntactical rules"²²⁷: in short, that our knowledge of a language is governed by tacitly known syntactical rules of a generative grammar.

This forceful idea inspired not only Dennett but also much of the ensuing work in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science, and it even led some, such as Stephen Stich, to argue for a complete syntactic theory of the mind. That *all* content – both personal level and subpersonal level content is best described in terms of a syntactic content.²²⁸ However, in an early paper, preceding his developed account of the syntactic theory of the mind, Stich explored the distinction between a subpersonal level and a personal level at a more specific area of the debate – that of belief-formation – by developing a dichotomy between subdoxastic states and beliefs, contrasting "the belief that *p* with the subdoxastic state which *stores or represents* the information that *p*"²²⁹ – an idea that seems at least reminiscent of the idea of a nonconceptual state of information, which we encountered in the quote from Evans above. Nevertheless, with respect to what it actually means that a subdoxastic state *represent*, Stich claims to be able to 'duck the issue': "For though this talk of states representing facts is difficult to explicate in a philosophically tolerable way, it is surprisingly easy to master intuitively."²³⁰ In his later accounts, as we

²²⁵ McDowell 1994: 198.

²²⁶ McDowell 1994: 198.

²²⁷ Davies 2005: 3.

²²⁸ As he says in his *From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science*: "As I see it, the notion of "content" or the folk psychological strategy of identifying a mental state by appeal to a "content sentence", despite all its utility in the workaday business of dealing with our fellow creatures, is simply out of place when our goal is the construction of a scientific theory about the mechanisms underlying behaviour." (Stich 1983: 5-6). We are therefore in need of a new cognitive theory, and "Cognitive theories which cleave to the STM [Syntactic Theory of the Mind] pattern treat mental states as relations to purely syntactic mental sentence tokens, and they detail the interactions among mental states in terms of the formal or syntactic properties of these tokens." (Stich 1983: 9).

²²⁹ Stich 1978: 510.

²³⁰ Stich 1978: 510. The only further elaboration we get is the following: "Still, a hint of how I think such talk is to be analyzed may be welcome. On my view, saying that a state in an information processing

saw, Stich's suggestion that even personal level representation can be described as simply syntactical representation surpasses the former distinction between beliefs and subdoxastic states. But Stich's initial vagueness in defining subpersonal content, and later boldness in equating all representation with syntactic content, seems to bring out neatly how discomfiting the notion of representation is when attributed to the subpersonal. The idea seems to foster that one either bites the bullet and embraces the somewhat undesirable result that personal mental representation is simply syntactical representation, or that one engages in the difficult task of trying to get personal level semantic content out of syntax.

In contrast to Stich's syntactic reduction of the mind, it is part of Dennett's theory that "the subpersonal level of description and explanation, the kinds of occurrences that are described ... in purely mechanistic terms ... are not to be *identified* with the sensations and actions of persons."²³¹ But, in what seems to be a contradiction and an obliteration of the dichotomy just developed, Dennett appears to open for the possibility that subpersonal descriptions may be "upgraded into an Intentional description"²³². As numerous commentators have noted: it seems difficult to reconcile this belief in the possibility of an 'upgraded' subpersonal content with the previously developed distinction, without actually collapsing the distinction between the personal and subpersonal level. According to Davies, Dennett tries to have it both ways by claiming that the "relation between Intentional descriptions of events, states or structures (as signals that carry certain messages or memory traces with certain contents) and extensional descriptions of them is one of *further interpretation*."²³³ Dennett's proposed solution, in other words, is to introduce intermediate levels of interpretation, or sub-systems of the subpersonal, taking us from a purely syntactic description of subpersonal content to full-fledged personal intentional content.²³⁴ But as Hornsby says;

system represents (the information (or fact) that) *p* is to say that the state bears some interesting resemblances to the belief that *p*." See Stich 1978: 510.

²³¹ Davies 2005: 6, my emphasis.

²³² Davies 2005: 6.

²³³ Davies 2005: 6. This is a quote taken from *Content and Consciousness*, p. 78, emphasis in original.

²³⁴ Dennett's suggestion of how to get from the subpersonal to the personal is developed in (among other) his *Brainstorms*, and consists of moving in steps, from simple units at the subpersonal level to more advanced units. As Hornsby quotes Dennett as saying: "Sub-personal theories proceed by analyzing a person into an organization of subsystems ... and attempting to explain the behaviour of the whole person as the outcome of the interaction of these subsystems." See Hornsby 2000: 8.

“Dennett’s continued insistence on the importance of his personal/subpersonal distinction becomes hard to fathom when properties visible at the personal level [e.g. desires and intentions] are meant to be the products of a stance that is equally appropriately adopted towards sub-personal things.”²³⁵

The difficulty leaves us, according to Davies, with two choices of how to understand the distinction between the two levels; either to hold that the attribution to subpersonal states of intentional content is not meant to be literal – that the content attributed to these states is merely ‘as if’ content – or, alternatively, to relax the distinction between subpersonal and personal states so as “to allow that personal-level intentionality is the product of adopting a stance that can just as well be adopted towards subpersonal-level systems.”²³⁶ The first is, according to Davies, McDowell’s preferred explanation, whereas the second represents the one most commonly adopted in recent philosophy of mind and cognitive science.²³⁷

In fact, McDowell’s paper “The Content of Perceptual Experience” seems to be more or less exclusively devoted to debunking Dennett’s later suggestion that the content of subpersonal states can be properly described by adopting an ‘intentional stance’. In taking up Dennett’s thought experiment – what the frog’s ‘subpersonal’ visual processing is supposed to tell the frog – McDowell argues that;

“nobody knows how to make sense of an animal’s internal control mechanism, and connect it conceptually to the competence it is supposed to explain, except by describing it *as if* it were, what we know it is not really, a semantic engine, interpreting inputs as signs of environmental facts and, as output, directing behaviour so as to be suitable to those facts in the light of the animal’s needs or goals.”²³⁸

While McDowell does not dismiss subpersonal content *tout court* – subpersonal content described as ‘as if’ content can “pull its weight in addressing a genuine explanatory need” – the question that preoccupies McDowell is “what enables us animals

²³⁵ Hornsby 2000: 8.

²³⁶ Davies 2005: 7.

²³⁷ Davies divides the first approach in “either a more constructive or a more critical spirit.” (Davies 2005: 9.) He takes McDowell and Hornsby to be representatives of the more constructive approach, while Searle to illustrate the critical stance. Both Davies (2005: 7) and Hornsby (2000: 8) treat the second approach as a kind of reductionism.

²³⁸ McDowell 1994: 199.

to be the semantic engines we are.”²³⁹ But the temptation to see “dealings with content on the part of animals [i.e. at the personal level] as somehow constitutively explained in terms of information-processing in their interiors ... is disastrous”, for the simple reason that “if we offer a constitutive explanation of genuine content in terms of a merely ‘as if’ attribution of content, we make genuine content fragile and problematic.”²⁴⁰

Two things seems evident from what McDowell says here: firstly, that ‘genuine content’, i.e. content at the personal level, is semantic content, or, which comes to the same for McDowell, intentional content. And secondly, that by attempting to construe personal level content from subpersonal level content, we make the question of how we can be semantic engines a difficult one. As he says somewhat later: “the attempt to see a constitutive relation between the lower and upper levels undermines our hold on the fact that animals are semantic engines.”²⁴¹ However, this brings out a crucial point in the discussion on nonconceptual content. For whereas McDowell dismisses the idea that personal level content is a ‘welling up to the surface’ of subpersonal ‘content’, safeguarding Dennett’s initial distinction between a syntactic subpersonal level and a semantically determinable personal level, José Bermúdez seems explicitly in the errand of welding the two levels of explanation. And he does so by addressing the question of the relationship between the levels of explanation, *through a discussion of nonconceptual content*; by considering, as he says, the “important structural commonalities”²⁴² between states with conceptual content (i.e. personal level states) and the different classes of states with nonconceptual content – hereunder, he will argue, subpersonal states.

The first paragraph of Bermúdez’s “Nonconceptual Content: From Perceptual Experience to Subpersonal Computational States” discloses, in a nutshell, his views on nonconceptual content, and the relation he sees between the debate on nonconceptual content and that on personal versus subpersonal content. He opens the paper by asking: “How distinctive are the cognitive processes, such as beliefs, desires, hopes and fears,

²³⁹ Both, McDowell 1994: 199. More specifically, McDowell holds that “[t]he ‘as if’ content that is usefully deployed at the lower level helps make intelligible the genuine content that appears at the higher level by way of ‘enabling’ explanations, not as somehow constituting that content.” (1994: 201-202.)

²⁴⁰ Both, McDowell 1994: 199.

²⁴¹ McDowell 1994: 202.

²⁴² Bermúdez 1995: 334.

which constitutively involve the possession of concepts?”²⁴³ If there are states “that possess content although they do not require possession of the concepts needed to specify that content” – i.e. states with a nonconceptual content – which “recent work in philosophy, psychology and cognitive sciences” seems to suggest, then “this suggests that the concept-involving states which have long been thought of as the only means by which cognition can take place are not really so distinctive after all.”²⁴⁴ We are nudged towards accepting that *if* there are states with a nonconceptual representational content, then the contribution from these states should not be seen as second-rate in comparison with the contribution from conceptual states in explaining our cognition.

Bermúdez initial claim is that there *are* such states: “Conceptual and nonconceptual contents are distinguished not by whether they are representational, but according to how they represent.”²⁴⁵ This is restated even more explicitly a few pages on:

“Conceptual and nonconceptual content are both forms of content *because there is a single notion of representation applicable to both of them.*”²⁴⁶

A large part of Bermúdez’s paper takes the form of drawing up this single notion of representation – ‘the important structural commonality’ that he finds between conceptual and nonconceptual content. In doing so, he identifies four criteria for counting as representing, but the most obvious requirement on such a notion of representation is of course that it does not “rule out the notion of nonconceptual content as a matter of definition”²⁴⁷. If we are able to provide a notion of representation freed of the requirement from conceptuality, we may, “When confronted with states that are candidates for the ascription of nonconceptual content ... ask whether these states satisfy the four conditions of content and thus qualify as representational states.”²⁴⁸

Having established that there *is* such a general account of representation applicable at the personal level, he then goes on to argue by analogy that the same holds at the

²⁴³ Bermúdez 1995: 333.

²⁴⁴ All quotes, Bermúdez 1995: 333.

²⁴⁵ Bermúdez 1995: 335.

²⁴⁶ Bermúdez 1995: 346. An important premise, which both McDowell and Bermúdez seems to accept, is that to have content is to represent, and to represent is to have content.

²⁴⁷ Bermúdez 1995: 344.

²⁴⁸ Bermúdez 1995: 352.

subpersonal level.²⁴⁹ Now that the notion of representation is liberated from any conceptual requirements, there is at least no *a priori* reason why subpersonal content should not be able to qualify as representational. In fact, the criteria Bermúdez lists for being representational seems well adapted to comprise also subpersonal content.²⁵⁰ But this move signals an important re-description of the issues under discussion: the discussion is no longer over whether or not there can be a concept-independent notion of content or representation in our experiences, but *whether there is content or representation at the subpersonal level*. In short, the notion of a nonconceptual content in perception is used to establish a singular notion of content or representation, which is then used as a lever to argue for representation or content at the subpersonal level. This is no surprise, as Bermúdez himself says in a later paper; “one of the guiding assumptions of cognitive science ... is that subpersonal information processing is genuinely representational.”²⁵¹

However, it is *precisely* the application of a notion of representation at the *subpersonal level* that distinguishes Bermúdez’s understanding of the debate on nonconceptual content from that of McDowell’s. Although an interesting discussion in itself, the question of whether or not subpersonal states can be said to be truly representational or not, is *not* part of the debate on nonconceptual content as *McDowell* sees it, but lies, on the contrary, prior to or outside the debate.²⁵² As Davies makes clear, for those who view subpersonal content as ‘as if’ content “it may seem that the appeal to unconscious representations and tacitly known rules involves a kind of category mistake in which distinctively personal-level notions, such as representation and rule, are applied at a subpersonal level of description.”²⁵³ And as we saw above, McDowell’s complaint was precisely that in attempting to construe personal level content from subpersonal ‘content’ we loose our grip on ‘genuine content’.

It seems therefore that Bermúdez has prejudged the issue and excluded himself from any further discussion with McDowell over nonconceptual content – at least as *McDowell*

²⁴⁹ List the criteria. Make a point that they do not presuppose conceptuality.

²⁵⁰ List the criteria.

²⁵¹ Bermúdez 2008: 58.

²⁵² McDowell does not discuss the relationship between personal and subpersonal content in *Mind and World*, but refers, in a footnote, to his paper “The Content of Perceptual Experience” for his view on this issue. (See McDowell 1996: 55, footnote 10).

²⁵³ Davies 2005: 7.

understands the issue. Bermúdez may, of course, insist on *his* understanding of the debate and continue to discuss nonconceptual content as he sees it, viz. so as to include the subpersonal. Or, alternatively, he may continue to discuss the relation between the personal and the subpersonal – a question McDowell has similarly addressed. But it is clear that neither of *these* debates coincide with what McDowell takes the debate on nonconceptual content to be about. It may seem that whether or not one allows a notion of subpersonal representation is an assumption, which determines two incompatible ways of understanding what the debate on nonconceptual content is about: for Bermúdez, the issue is to explain how the personal and the subpersonal alike can be said to represent, through a notion of representation or content which is independent of our concept-possession; for McDowell, the question is not about the subpersonal at all, but whether or not all personal level content can be said to be constituted by concepts. By McDowell's lights, defining 'representational' such that it embraces subpersonal content is simply a non-starter, but that is *not* because McDowell's constraints rules out any discussion of nonconceptual content per definition. McDowell's framing of the question on nonconceptual content *does* rule out subpersonal content – it is simply a contradiction in terms – but there is still the issue whether all *personal level* content must be conceptual.²⁵⁴

If we set aside suggestions that develop the idea of a nonconceptual content in the direction of a subpersonal content, and those – which we discussed above – that frame the debate in terms of the possession of concepts, we have narrowed the scope down considerably. But are there still other conceptions of the debate that 'cuts the pie' differently from that of McDowell? In contrast to Crane, who appears to pursue the notion of a nonconceptual content directly from the perspective of mental states, and whether or not we need to *possess* concepts in order to have an experience with that content, Michael Ayers conceives of the debate on nonconceptual content in terms of what he takes to be a prior question; that of the *acquisition* of concepts. As such, he construes the debate as a modern version of an age-old question in philosophy; whether we abstract concepts from experience, or, if concepts are somehow prior to experience.

²⁵⁴ Noë and Cussins's suggestions seem to be another two approaches that should perhaps best be placed within a 'cognitive' approach to the nonconceptual content debate.

According to Ayers, we must be able to stand in intentional relations *in order* to acquire concepts, i.e. that the intentional relation comes before conceptuality. This may simply sound like a reversion to Evans's suggestion, who claimed that we are presented with a nonconceptual input, that are then conceptualized. But in acting as input to a concept-possessing system, Evans says nothing of how those concepts are acquired in the first place. Nor does Crane, who merely claims that we need not *possess* the concepts in order to have an intentional experience. But is this suggestion compatible with McDowell's? In contrast to the other two suggestions so far explored, Ayers takes himself explicitly to be engaging with and criticising McDowell's conceptualism. In the following section I discuss Ayers conception of what the debate is about and how it relates to McDowell's understanding of the debate – as well as a criticism of Ayers by Hannah Ginsborg, and a how her suggestion may mitigate the worry that Ayers's criticism raises for a conceptualist position, although Ayers's conception of the debate, seems, in the end, not be what McDowell takes to be at issue.

V. Intentionality and Conceptuality

Michael Ayers tries to drive a wedge between intentionality and conceptuality – to borrow a phrase from Hannah Ginsborg – by arguing that conceptualism holds a view on concept-possession that is either self-defeating strong or vacuous. On the strong version of conceptualism, which Ayers takes McDowell to subscribe to, “the possession of a concept is either the same as, or extremely closely related to, the possession of a linguistic capacity.”²⁵⁵ Ayers argues that if the conceptualist adopts this demanding version, upholding that one needs to be in possession of a language to entertain intentional experiential content, her position is both implausible and flies in the face of the empiricist principle that experience precedes concepts. For it seems clear that “I can see something as a trapezium without knowing the meaning either of the term ‘trapezium’, or of any of its synonyms.”²⁵⁶ Or, in a form emphasising the high demands on concept-possession under the strong version of conceptualism: it seems clear that I do

²⁵⁵ The characterisation is Ginsborg's (2006: 8), drawing on Ayers's claims that McDowell holds that “post-infantile human sensory experience must have content in so far as it is what grounds perceptual belief, but that this content is itself conceptual or propositional, dependent on language and culture.” (Ayers 2004: 239). See also (Ayers 2002: 5).

²⁵⁶ Ginsborg 2006: 8.

not need to possess the *word* 'trapezium' to perceive something as a trapezium. On the other hand – on a weak version of conceptualism – maintaining that to possess a concept simply requires that we be able to discriminate objects perceptually seems to be quite trivial and therefore too weak to support any interesting version of conceptualism.

In his "Can there be a New Empiricism?" Ayers attempts to undermine any attraction conceptualism may have by establishing a version of empiricism that does not fall to the 'Myth of the Given', while at the same time keeping the empiricist principle that, as he says: "In general, experience comes before concepts, and it is because we experience the world as we do that we are in a position to acquire the concepts appropriate to any account of things in the world, or of that experience."²⁵⁷ His arguments seems therefore to open up a *third* way of describing the debate on nonconceptual content, different to the other mentioned, both in that it claims that the proper line of attack is through a critical look at the relation between language and language acquisition, and intentionality (where Crane and Bermúdez seems to discuss mental states or the content of subpersonal experience directly), and as a result of this, that *all* experiential content is nonconceptual. Disagreeing with Ayers that intentionality can be separated from conceptuality, Ginsborg nevertheless follows Ayers in his characteristic of the debate, arguing that although, "Empiricist commitments along these lines figure to some degree in the work of other nonconceptualists ... it is only in Ayers's work that we find such a forthright and clearly articulated characterization of what is fundamentally at stake in the debate over nonconceptual content."²⁵⁸

The empiricism Ayers seeks to establish is not new as such, but trades off an older, now largely forgotten version stemming from Hobbes. According to Ayers, Hobbes's version has been generally ignored, discarded as outdate and surpassed by versions set forth by Hume and Russell. However, although with time more refined and sophisticated than Hobbes's early aspirings, in limiting ourselves to these newer versions of empiricism we loose out on recourses to counter the arguments against the 'Myth of the Given'.²⁵⁹ And as he says, "It is a real and, surely, important question whether there is a

²⁵⁷ Ayers 2004: 255.

²⁵⁸ Ginsborg 2006: 2.

²⁵⁹ "There also lies an often unspoken, and in my view very largely misguided assumption that later forms of a philosophical approach such as Empiricism, for example Hume's or, indeed, Russell's or Ayer's, are

tenable position, reasonably describable as Empiricism on both historical and philosophical grounds, lying between the kind of view that critics of the Myth have refuted and the kind of view that they in general adopt as its alternative.”²⁶⁰

The problem facing empiricism is, in Ayers words, a close relation of the ‘binding problem’²⁶¹ stemming from Descartes’s attack on empiricism; “that we cannot even take a piece of wax undergoing sensible change to be the same from moment to moment without an innate concept of an extended, flexible, and mutable substance”²⁶². Or as he says a page later; that “an intellectual concept must be added to what is given in order to make possible the perceptual reidentification of bodies over time.”²⁶³

In particular, the problem appears to arise for empiricists following Locke, as a result of the attempt to combine two ideas; on the one hand, that we in experience are faced with “objects of infallible immediate perception or acquaintance”, and secondly, that these experiences have a “molecular structure [and thus can be broken down] into atomic simples”²⁶⁴ Because Locke saw our perception of objects as complex, built out of atomic simples – a move that was meant to explain how we can think of things we have never experienced – the ‘binding problem’ seems to get a foothold and threatens to undermine our knowledge of objects. According to Ayers, the only alternative that has been acknowledged to this view, is “some version of a broadly (if usually heretically) Kantian model of experience as the application of intellectual concepts to sensory input”²⁶⁵.

However, Locke’s compositionism is not the only option available to empiricism. On Hobbes’s view, “there is no talk of the combination of simple sensible qualities to form complex ideas of substantial things.”²⁶⁶ Instead of the bottom-up approach adopted by Locke, on Hobbes’s empiricism “no such binding problem exists just because it holds

somehow purer and more consistent forms of the doctrine, and so more worth our consideration. It may be that, as a general approach becomes more sophisticated in particular respects, something about it is obscured.” (Ayers 2000: 116).

²⁶⁰ Ayers 2000: 112.

²⁶¹ See Ayers 2000: 116. Although Ayers gives no explicit definition of the binding-problem, a natural characterisation of the problem, based on Ayers discussion, may be: what is it that binds objects together into unitary wholes in our experience of them? Or alternatively: what is it that makes us perceive objects as unitary wholes in experience?

²⁶² Ayers 2000: 114.

²⁶³ Ayers 2000: 115.

²⁶⁴ Both, Ayers 2000: 112.

²⁶⁵ Ayers 2000: 117.

²⁶⁶ Ayers 2000: 116.

that in primitive sense-experience individual bodies in space are *already presented as physically discrete and unitary objects*”²⁶⁷. This suggests the basis for a different view of the relation between experience and intentionality, a view that does not impose the possession of a language as a necessary requirement for object-directed thought or intentionality. On a Hobbesian empiricism, we do not need to possess a prior set of concepts in order for our experiences to present us with a unitary intentional content. On the contrary, concepts inherit their intentionality from the only way we sense objects, from the ‘primitive sense-experiences of individual, discrete bodies’.²⁶⁸ Hobbes’s empiricism seems therefore to be able to maintain an intentional relation to the content of experience *and* its empiricist fundament that experience is prior to concepts. However, is this a conclusive proof that we are not obliged to accept a McDowellian conceptualism as the only alternative to the ‘Myth of the Given’? How plausible is Ayers attempt to separate intentionality and conceptuality? And how accurate is his characterisation of the debate on nonconceptual content – at least as a criticism of McDowell?

As we have seen, Ginsborg professes to accept Ayers’s characterisation of the debate, but argues that his attempt at separating intentionality and conceptuality fails. In criticising Ayers she therefore tries to disprove his claim that “one cannot consistently be both an Empiricist and Conceptualist”²⁶⁹ by presenting a version of conceptualism “which goes some way towards meeting his criticisms, and which, in particular, respects the empiricist intuitions which he rightly emphasizes.”²⁷⁰ I find Ginsborg’s suggestion illuminating, yielding a plausible conceptualism that seems able to fend off some of the most serious nonconceptualist challenges in play. However, in doing so I think she comes much closer to McDowell’s own suggestion than she realizes. In criticizing Ayers and setting out her own suggestion she draws a number of distinctions that I believe takes her

²⁶⁷ Ayers 2000: 117 (my emphasis). As he says: “I would suggest that it was only when reflections on the contrast between substance and sensible accidents were linked, as by Locke, with a systematic compositional theory of thought and meaning that the notorious notion of the “Given” emerged as a “dogma,” as it were, of Empiricism.” (Ayers 2000: 116.)

²⁶⁸ I believe my understanding of Ayers’s suggestion is similar to that of Hannah Ginsborg. In criticising Ayers’s attempt at separating intentionality and conceptuality, she characterises Ayers’s suggestion in the following terms: “The suggestion here is that experience can be object-directed without presenting us with items that are conceptual or propositional in shape, so that its content is intentional without being conceptual.” (Ginsborg 2006: 6). See discussion below.

²⁶⁹ Ayers 2000: 119.

²⁷⁰ Ginsborg 2006: 2.

away from Ayers's characterization of the fundamental issue under discussion in the nonconceptual-debate – a characterization which I believe is mistaken when it comes to what McDowell takes himself to be arguing – and to a proper understanding of what the debate is fundamentally about. In the end, it seems that Ginsborg only upholds the 'empiricist principle' in a version that is modified to suit her own suggestion and which I believe is compatible with conceptualism as advocated by McDowell. Before discussing Ginsborg's view and drawing attention to the connections I see between her view and McDowell's, let me attempt to make clear why I take Ayers's characterization of the nonconceptual-debate to be misguided as a description pertaining to McDowell's conceptualism.

In elaborating on a new Hobbesian-inspired empiricism that is not vulnerable to the 'Myth of the Given', while remaining faithful to the empiricist principle that experience precedes thought, Ayers argues, as we have seen, that the only alternative that has been acknowledged is a "broadly (if usually heretically) Kantian model of experience as the application of intellectual concepts to sensory input".²⁷¹ However, as a description of the position taken up by McDowell this seems quite wrong. McDowell explicitly says that, "The relevant conceptual capacities are drawn on *in* receptivity ... It is not that they are exercised *on* an extra-conceptual deliverance of receptivity."²⁷² And as he goes on to say, "We should understand what Kant calls "intuition" – experiential intake – not as a bare getting of an extra-conceptual Given, but as a kind of occurrence or state that already has conceptual content. In experience one takes in, for instance sees, *that things are thus and so*."²⁷³ In fact, the idea that there is a pre-conceptual or extra-conceptual given in experience that only becomes conceptualised once we employ our concepts *on* experience is precisely *Evans's* version of nonconceptualism – which, according to McDowell, is an example of the 'Myth of the Given' and as such singled out as one of the main targets for criticism in *Mind and World*. It is nevertheless here, at what he takes to be an example of an illegitimate view on the relation between concepts and experience, that Ayers directs his main attack against conceptualism and McDowell in particular: by challenging what he takes to be a central conceptualist adherence to the principle that pre-

²⁷¹ Ayers 2000: 117.

²⁷² McDowell 1996: 9 (emphasis in original).

²⁷³ McDowell 1996: 9 (emphasis in original).

existing concepts are applied *on* experience – that, in contrast to the empiricist principle, concepts precede experience. But in addition to being his main objection to Evans, McDowell never discusses the empiricist principle or its Kantian counterpart as Ayers understands them. That is, McDowell does not discuss the *acquisition* of concepts but the role of concepts *in* experience in mature, concepts-possessing individuals. Throughout *Mind and World* McDowell's discussion is focused on the experience of individuals that *already* possesses concepts, limiting the discussion of the sense experience of animals and young children that are said not to possess concepts to a few scattered remarks here and there. The debate on nonconceptual content is therefore not about whether concepts *precede* experience or vice versa – whether we abstract concepts from experience, or employ innate concepts in experience – but whether mature, adult human experience is conceptual or not, in the following sense, which I believe comes out perspicuously in the disagreement between Evans and McDowell: whether there in experience is a pre-conceptual given, which may be conceptualized if input to a concept-applying system, as Evans claims,²⁷⁴ or, if in experiencing, we 'see that things are thus and so' through our passive employment of concepts. Although there are a number of similarities between Evans and McDowell's positions I believe we come the closest to seeing the core of what is at stake in the debate on nonconceptual content by emphasising the difference between the two. While McDowell acknowledges that we share a sensitivity to features of our environment with animals (which do not possess concepts), he disagrees with Evans that we can factorise our experiences into a concept-dependent component and a concept-independent sensitivity. We cannot, as he says, "factorise the truth about us into independent components", or in the Kantian jargon that he most often employs, "separate sensibility from understanding".²⁷⁵ According to McDowell, it is in other words not possible to separate off a nonconceptual component of our experience.

This is, however, quite different from Ayers' characterisation of the debate. But to further emphasise the distance between what Ayers takes the debate on nonconceptual content to be about and what McDowell actually seems to discuss, it appears, in fact, that McDowell would be in a position to accept some kind of empiricist story of how we

²⁷⁴ See McDowell 1996: 49.

²⁷⁵ McDowell 1996: 69.

acquire concepts along the lines Ayers suggests. Towards the end of *Mind and World* McDowell sets forth the view that the “language into which a human being is first initiate stands over against her as a prior embodiment of mindedness, of the possibility of an orientation to the world.”²⁷⁶ And as he goes on, “if an individual human being is to realize her potential of taking her place in that succession [of mindedness vested in language], which is the same thing as acquiring a mind, the capacity to think and act intentionally, at all, the first thing that needs to happen is for her to be initiate into a tradition as it stands.”²⁷⁷ However, this clearly emphasises that for an infant to (eventually) enter the sphere of conceptual thought, it must be *initiated* into a concept-using community; it must somehow *acquire* those concepts in moving from a state where it does not possess concepts to becoming a fully mature, concept using individual.²⁷⁸

Leaving Ayers’s conception of the nonconceptual debate aside, Hannah Ginsborg challenges Ayers’s claim that a conceptualist must choose between an implausible and a trivial position, seeking to develop a conceptualist view that does not hold a view on concept possession that is overly strong, nor vacuous. Although she claims to follow Ayers’s characterisation of the nonconceptual debate, she immediately sets herself apart from Ayers’s empiricist principle, arguing that her position:

“differs from a commonly invoked stereotype of Kantianism in that, rather than drawing on Kant’s account of the categories and their relation to experience, it appeals to his account of empirical concepts. This means, as we will see, that it does not commit us to a view on which experience is shaped by a set of concepts which we possess antecedently to any experience. Rather it makes room for the idea that empirical concepts are possible only in, and through, experience.”²⁷⁹

In making this qualification I believe she radically parts with Ayers, for she no longer faces the imagined conceptualist recipient of Ayers’s criticism. On the other hand, her ensuing point on Kant aligns her with a central feature in McDowell’s conceptualism, which he on his side traces to and adopts from Wittgenstein. Instead of assuming a

²⁷⁶ McDowell 1996: 125.

²⁷⁷ McDowell 1996: 126.

²⁷⁸ McDowell does not seem particularly clear on how this is supposed to happen, and refers to the concept of a tradition to Gadamer.

²⁷⁹ Ginsborg 2006: 9.

distorted ‘conceptualist principle’, in which our experience is structured by our pre-existing concepts, we may insist “that our imaginative activity can be, and be recognized by us, as rule-governed, without our having any awareness of the relevant rules prior to engaging in that activity.”²⁸⁰ This suggestion, which she takes “to be a consequence of the account of aesthetic experience which [Kant] gives in the *Critique of Judgment*”²⁸¹ is supported by her distinction between seeing something in *a certain way*, and seeing something *as being* a certain way. The distinction is subtle but extremely forceful: “Perceiving something *in a certain way* is not equivalent to being disposed to sort it in a certain way, but it can be characterized as what it is about a creature’s conscious state which accounts for its sorting it in that way.”²⁸² Thus, perceiving something in a certain way is not equivalent to being *disposed* to see it as *being* a certain way, or as she says: “A subject can have a characteristic way of perceiving red things, one that enables her to discriminate them from things of other colours, without perceiving them as red, or indeed as having any features at all.”²⁸³ A subject may in other words have a way of seeing or sorting things, without having any awareness of the rules governing the sorting activity, to make the connection to the Kantian principle explicit. However, Ginsborg argues that our seeing or sorting objects can nevertheless be recognized as rule-governed in a different sense, a sense which she describes as “more promising as a basis for an account of concepts: that of a way in which one *ought* to perceive something.”²⁸⁴ Although, as she says, the most pressing point is to explain the normativity of this ‘ought’, there are a number of similarities between her suggestion and McDowell’s Wittgensteinian treatment of rule-following.

In “Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following”, McDowell describes the idea on what it is to follow a rule which he sets out to undermine in the following terms:

“What counts as doing the same thing, within the practice in question, is fixed by its rules. The rules mark out rails along which correct activity within the practice must run. These rails are there anyway, independent of the responses that characterize a participant in the practice, that a series of correct moves in

²⁸⁰ Ginsborg 2006: 9.

²⁸¹ Ginsborg 2006: 9.

²⁸² Ginsborg 2006: 9 (my emphasis).

²⁸³ Ginsborg 2006: 10.

²⁸⁴ Ginsborg 2006: 11.

the practice really is a case of going on doing the same thing.”²⁸⁵

But, as McDowell says, “the idea that the rules of a practice marks out rails traceable independently of the reactions of participants is suspect even in the apparently ideal case [of adding ‘two’ to a preceding number].”²⁸⁶ In fact, “there is nothing that keeps our practices in line except the reactions and responses we learn in learning them.”²⁸⁷ It seems to me that this is not only compatible with Ginsborg’s notion of following a rule, which she takes from Kant, but similar in the main idea that abidance by a rule is not abidance by some pre-existing, independent Platonic idea (‘rails stretching to infinity’), but engagement in an ongoing human activity. As Ginsborg says;

“The approach which I am suggesting reverses a certain traditional conception of how a grasp of rules is related to an activity’s being, and being recognized as, governed by rules. On the traditional conception, we cannot engage in a rule-governed activity without first grasping a linguistically articulable set of rules which then are available to guide us in the performance of the activity. We assess the correctness or incorrectness of our performances of the activity in terms of how successful we are in conforming to the rules which guide us. But on the conception that I am suggesting, we can learn to engage in a rule-governed activity *without antecedently grasping the rules that govern it*. We acquire a grasp of the rules *simply by virtue of becoming competent in the activity*, as long as the performance of the activity itself involves the awareness that, in performing it, we are by and large performing it as we ought.”²⁸⁸

In particular the last emphasized segment of this passage seems reminiscent of McDowell’s view on rule-following. However, whereas McDowell’s discussion of rule-following remains detached from the discussion on nonconceptual content, Ginsborg’s distinction between seeing something a certain way, and seeing something as *being* as certain way allows us to see much clearer how the idea can be put to use in this context. In particular, Ginsborg takes this view to undermine Christopher Peacocke’s suggestion that there is a nonconceptual ‘mode’ in experience. For in invoking a ‘mode’ under which something is represented, the two senses of seeing are conflated, which the following passage that Ginsborg quotes from Peacocke vividly shows:

²⁸⁵ McDowell 1981/2000: 41.

²⁸⁶ McDowell 1981/2000: 41.

²⁸⁷ McDowell 1981/2000: 43.

²⁸⁸ Ginsborg 2006: 13-14 (my emphasis).

“The idea that a nonlinguistic creature sees a shape as a diamond rather than as square does not seem to me to be philosophically objectionable. One can envisage sorting experiments, or forced-choice tests sensitive to perceived similarity relations, which give empirical evidence that the creature has seen the shape one way rather than another”²⁸⁹.

As Ginsborg here points out, the first ‘see’ is intended as ‘seeing something as *being*’, the second use of ‘see’ is the ‘seeing something a certain way’. But if we adhere to the distinction, it becomes clear that whereas seeing an object a certain way is a possibility open to perceivers lacking concepts (in McDowell’s words, sensitivity to the environment), seeing an object as *being* a certain way is strictly dependent on the possession of concepts. Alternatively: that to see an object as *being* a certain way simply *is* to possess those concepts. This version is, as Ginsborg says, weaker than the strong version of conceptualism, which demands that to see an object as being a certain way requires a language, and it is stronger than merely equating concept-possession with sorting-abilities; it requires, in addition, that we are sensitive to how we *ought* to apply the concept, or similarly, “to the reaction and responses we learn in learning them”.²⁹⁰

Ginsborg’s suggestion shows, I believe, not how to defend a conceptualism while maintaining Ayers’s empiricist principle – which I do not think that there is any need to worry about anyway, as conceptualism can be made to be compatible with an empiricist account of concept-acquisition (the issue is, regardless of whether this can be done or not, *not* the essential issue) – but how to develop a cogent conceptualism that addresses the real issues underlying the nonconceptualist debate, visible in Evans and McDowell’s disagreement: whether concepts are applied *on* or *in* experience. I take Ginsborg to support McDowell in arguing that we cannot see an object as being a certain way without possessing the relevant concepts, which is the same as saying that we cannot have an intentional or representational experience without possessing the concepts involved. At the same time, Ginsborg’s notion of ‘seeing something a certain way’ provides McDowell with a satisfying account of the sensitivity he attributes to animals and young children.

²⁸⁹ Ginsborg 2006: footnote 25.

²⁹⁰ McDowell 1981/2000: 41.

VI. Conclusion

The three approaches here discussed seem to construe the debate on nonconceptual content in three rather different ways, and most importantly for our concern; they seem all to draw up the debate in quite different terms from that of *McDowell*. In so far as McDowell is taken to be the conceptualist *par excellence*, and ‘conceptualism’ something that stands or falls with him – as many seem to think – it should go without saying that one needs to be clear on what McDowell actually takes himself to be committed to with his claim that the content of our experience is conceptual. However, too much of the debate on nonconceptual content seem mired in a lack of clarity on what the debate on nonconceptual content is a debate about, and it seems that the proper question to ask should not be ‘what is nonconceptual content?’ – as if one could find *one* answer – but, ‘in what different ways have the idea of a nonconceptual content been developed?’.

In Tim Crane’s case, it seems that nonconceptual content is tied to the question of whether or not a subject, in having an experience, needs to possess the concepts that would be used in giving a canonical description of that experience. As such, Crane conceives the debate as being about the requirements on concept-*possession* that faces an experiencing subject. However, this common way of conceiving the debate frames the question in terms that are at odds with McDowell’s understanding of the issue: in contrast to Crane’s focus on the nonconceptual nature of mental *states*, McDowell takes the question to be about the *content* of perceptual states.

Differing from Crane, José Bermúdez develops the idea of a nonconceptual content at the level of the subpersonal. That there could be *representation* or content at the level of states of the perceptual system, a kind of content which – in virtue of belonging to a sub-personal level – would not be describable as conceptual. This takes the debate on nonconceptual content in a different direction – one returning the focus of the debate to the *content* of those subpersonal experiences – but it is a view that McDowell straightforwardly dismisses. For McDowell, subpersonal “content” is only ‘*as if*’ content, and has nothing to do with the content of personal level perceptual experiences. As he says, it is a confusion to take a legitimate notion in cognitive psychology as having anything to do at the level of acting subjects. Although there seems to be an increasing

trend to perceive the question in those terms²⁹¹, for McDowell the issue of nonconceptual content is a question that belongs on a very different arena.

Michael Ayers, on his side, takes the issue in yet another direction by characterizing the debate in terms of an ancient philosophical problem; as addressing the near perennial question whether we acquire concepts through experiences, or, if our way of perceiving the world depends on a prior conceptual ability. However, nor does this way of construing the debate seem to do justice to the way McDowell conceives of it. Whereas Ayers focuses on the *acquisition* of concepts, McDowell's focus is not on how we come to possess concepts but on how best to characterise the perceptual experience of concept-possessors. Although an interesting question, as he says, the evolutionary account of how we have come to possess a language is not the philosophical question that drives McDowell.

The preceding has not been an attempt to give an exhaustive genealogy of the development of the debate on nonconceptual content – in what directions the idea has been developed, and whether the various suggestions are compatible or not – but merely to give a brief sketch of three, very different suggestions in play. The state of the debate is plagued by a lack of clarity on the important point of making it clear what the various contenders are taking the debate to be about, and my agenda in sketching these three different conceptions of the debate has been no more than to draw attention to this deficit in an ongoing and increasingly ramified debate in contemporary philosophy of mind. To point to the need for a greater self-consciousness in determining what the debate is a debate about. A number of other ways in which the debate has been developed has therefore had to be bypassed in the rough sketch here presented, and a more thorough picture would, in addition to fill out the barely commenced survey, have to deal with such important but overlooked questions in the debate as 'what is meant by a concept?', and 'what is it to possess a concept?'. It is quite interesting that these questions are not addressed to a greater extent in the literature than they are, and a survey of the various suggestions would probably reveal that one reason for the diversity of ways in which the idea of a nonconceptual content has been developed is due to the difference in view on

²⁹¹ See van Geen and de Vignemont 2006.

these questions.²⁹²

However, for McDowell, the debate on nonconceptual content seems in the end constrained to a rather narrow existence within the debate on the relation between mind and world that is at issue between him and Evans. As we saw above, at issue is Evans's suggestion that "when we make judgements about the perceptible world, we must be converting experiential content of a kind we share with mere animals, so that it must be nonconceptual, into conceptual form."²⁹³ However, for McDowell there is an important difference between "a merely animal mode of life, in an environment, and a human mode of life, in the world."²⁹⁴ Whereas animals have at best a kind of 'proto-subjectivity', the human mode of life is raised "above the pressure of biological need", and is characterised by – borrowing a phrase from Gadamer – a "free distances orientation" to the world.²⁹⁵ In contrast to the proto-subjectivity of animals, adult humans have genuine subjectivity through their conceptual abilities. And it is the explanatory potential that the notion of a conceptual content has in providing concept-possession humans with a standing in the world, an intentional relation to the reality, that motivates the claim that our experience is already conceptual: it is the crucial role conceptual content plays in bridging the mind and world that accounts for McDowell's conception of the debate on nonconceptual content. As he says towards the end of the lectures,

"It is the spontaneity of the understanding, the power of conceptual thinking, that brings both the world and the self into view. Creatures without conceptual capacities lack self-consciousness and – this is part of the same package – experience of objective reality."²⁹⁶

Only through a conceptual relation to the world do we acquire a mind, a way of conceiving how experience can stand in a justificatory relation to the mind: how the

²⁹² It is for instance, not clear that all parties involved understand 'concepts' as a 'logical' notion or a psychological notion. Compare Margolis and Laurence's entry in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy on concepts, where they delineate a variety of different ways in which 'concepts' have been understood. On the view that takes concepts to be mental representations, "concepts are psychological entities, taking as its starting point the representational theory of the mind (RTM)." However, the view that concepts are Fregean senses "identifies concepts with *abstract* objects, as opposed to mental objects and mental states." (Both, Margolis and Laurence 2008).

²⁹³ McDowell 1996: 114.

²⁹⁴ McDowell 1996: 115.

²⁹⁵ McDowell 1996: 116.

²⁹⁶ McDowell 1996: 114.

mind, defined by its rational relations, and the world, how things are, come to be related.
For McDowell, it seems to be *this* the debate on a nonconceptual content is about.

Essay III. A Semantic Solution to the Generic Problem

I. Introduction

In some of his semantic works, McDowell seeks to defend a view that seems to play a fundamental role in his philosophy of mind and language: that there is room for *de re* thoughts or utterances within a Fregean theory of sense which respects Frege's seminal distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*.²⁹⁷ A way of seeing this is as an attempt at construing a semantic solution to the generic problem of how the mind can be related to the world. As McDowell makes clear in his "Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space": a reason to pursue a notion of singular propositions, or object-dependent thought,

"is the interest of its radically anti-Cartesian implications. In a fully Cartesian picture, the inner life takes place in an autonomous realm, transparent to the introspective awareness of its subject; the access of subjectivity to the rest of the world becomes correspondingly problematic, in a way that has familiar manifestations in the mainstream of post-Cartesian epistemology. If we let there be quasi-Russellian singular propositions about, say, ordinary perceptible objects among the contents of inner space, we can no longer be regarding inner space as a locus of configurations that are self-standing, not beholden to external conditions; and there is now no question of a gulf, which it might be the task of philosophy to try to bridge, or to declare unabridgeable, between the realm of subjectivity and the world of ordinary objects."²⁹⁸

The first line of the quote here given seems to invoke precisely the dualism between mind and world that McDowell, in its specific epistemological form, addresses in *Mind and World*: between an autonomous coherentist 'spinning in the void', which can provide no external justification to our beliefs, and treating warrant as simply *given* in experience. And the second line of the quote seems no less clearly to argue that by introducing 'quasi-Russellian' singular propositions – *de re*, or object-dependent propositions – the problem is made to go away. As McDowell would like to keep the strength and advantages – the fine-grained thoughts – that a theory of sense allows, while nevertheless

²⁹⁷ In the following, I will refer mainly to "De Re Senses", "Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space", and a recent paper called "Evans's Frege". However, the issue is not limited to these articles but seems to occupy a central place in most of McDowell's work on semantics. The issue is addressed in "Intentionality De Re", and "On the Sense and Reference of a Proper Name", and leads over to a long-standing debate between McDowell and Michael Dummett on full-blooded versus modest theories of meaning (see, in this respect, also footnote 303 below).

²⁹⁸ McDowell 1986/1998: 237.

securing a relation to the world, it seems therefore essential that he find some way of informing a Fregean theory with a Russellian notion of object-dependent thought.²⁹⁹

However, according to most interpreters of Frege, the notion of *de re* thoughts or utterances simply cannot be made to cohere with the distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. It is argued that Frege's view of sense, on what appears to be a commonly adopted interpretation, that "all thought about concrete individuals is indirect, mediated by senses that are independent of those individuals" rules out any notion of *de re* sense – a notion, which is taken to mean; "senses whose existence and identity is dependent upon their reference"³⁰⁰. In the opening lines of his "De Re Senses", McDowell notes this opposition to bringing *de re* thoughts or utterances into a Fregean framework, saying that:

"It is commonly believed that a Fregean philosophy of language and thought can represent an utterance, or a propositional attitude, as being about an object only by crediting it with a content that determines the object by specification, or at least in such a way that the content is available to be thought or expressed *whether the object exists or not*. To resist this restriction would be to hold out for the idea that utterances and thoughts can be essentially *de re*; and that idea is supposed to be incapable of being made to fit within the framework provided by the theory of sense and *Bedeutung*."³⁰¹

The problem facing McDowell and his opponents in determining whether or not Fregean senses can be said to be *de re* may at first seem like a straightforward exegetical question: is there textual evidence to back-up the claim that *de re* thoughts are compatible with Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, or do the texts firmly rule out the

²⁹⁹ McDowell seems to waver between whether or not he takes this to be a view that Frege actually held, although the evidence seems to count in favour of seeing McDowell as merely coming up with a suggestion that is not in *conflict* with what Frege says – a view that is *Fregean*, rather than Frege's. In "Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space", we find him saying that: "Of course this does not straightforwardly fit with what Frege says; at best this may be what he is driving at, in an anyway unhappy region of his thinking. But in any case the question should not be whether Frege himself clearly embraced the idea of object-dependent singular senses, but whether the idea is available, so that we can recognize object-dependent thought outside Russell's restriction without flouting the Fregean principle about the topology of psychological space." (McDowell 1986/1998: 235.)

³⁰⁰ Both quotes are taken from the Stanford encyclopaedia's entry on "Singular Propositions". However, similar-sounding phrases are easy to find. Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny say that according to both Frege and Russell, "A name is empty because its associated description fails to denote. But the description, and hence the name, still has a sense." (Devitt and Sterelny 1999: 40-41). Kenneth Taylor puts the issue thus: "Singular propositions stand in sharp contrast to Fregean thoughts. The building blocks for Fregean thoughts are modes of presentation. Singular thoughts, on the other hand, are built up from objects like you or me or Mount Everest (and from their properties and relations) and not from mere modes of presentation of such objects." (Taylor 1998: 266).

³⁰¹ McDowell 1984/1998: 214 (my emphasis).

compatibility of *de re* or object-dependent thoughts with that distinction? However, rather than engaging in an interpretative exercise of trying to fit *de re* thoughts into a frame which, according to most commentators is fundamentally at odds with Frege's distinction, McDowell assumes the more radical stance of seeking to undermine a frame of thought, which makes the project seem prejudged in the first place. As he says, "My purpose ... is not to repeat or embellish Evans's positive considerations [in favour of a Fregean account of *de re* senses], but to criticise a theoretical structure within which they are bound to seem incomprehensible."³⁰² Rather than juxtaposing the dominant view of Fregean sense with a standard conception of *de re* thoughts, McDowell's "De Re Senses" presents a novel conception of what it is for a thought to be *de re*, which, as we will see, he argues *is* compatible with a reading of Fregean senses.

McDowell's criticism of what he takes to be an inhibiting framework – the standard conception of *de re* – is sketched in section three of this essay. However, can an alternative notion of the *de re*, hospitable to a Fregean notion of sense, be construed? In "Evans's Frege" and "Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space", McDowell does his utmost to show how we can find room for an idea of object-dependent thought in a Fregean framework, and in section four of this essay I recapitulate this, McDowell's more constructive attempt, at defining a notion of object-dependent thought available to a Fregean.

However, this does not present a complete case for Fregean *de re* senses – to do that one would have to consider McDowell's (and Evans's) reading of Fregean senses. That, on the other hand, is an issue of great complexity, which has led to a long-standing dispute between McDowell and Michael Dummett over modest versus full-blooded theories of meaning and would require (at least!) an essay for itself in order to be dealt with adequately. My aim in this paper is the more modest one of seeing how McDowell thinks *de re*, or object-dependent thought can provide a way of dispelling the generic problem of mind's relation to the world.³⁰³ However, before looking at McDowell's

³⁰² McDowell 1984/1998: 214.

³⁰³ I believe R. M. Sainsbury distinguishes the same two points when he notes that: "John McDowell (1977) made two important claims. One is that we need not think of Fregean senses as descriptions; more generally, we need not suppose we can analyse them in other terms; hence 'crediting names with senses ... is not necessarily crediting them with anything like connotation or descriptive meaning' (McDowell 1977: 163). The other is that we can coherently form the notion of a *de re* sense, one which could not exist unless

suggestion to the opposite, what exactly is it with Frege's distinction that supposedly prevents it from being made to cohere with a notion of *de re* thoughts?

II. *Balking at Fregean de re senses*

Frege introduced the distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* in order to solve, among others, the problem of identity; how it can be that “statements of the form ‘a=a’ and ‘a=b’ differ in ‘cognitive value’.”³⁰⁴ Or, in Frege's famous example; how it can be that we obtain new knowledge when we come to know that the morning star, which we know as Hesperus, and the evening star, which we know as Phosphorous, both refer to the planet Venus. “Frege solves the problem”, as Avrum Stroll puts it,

“by drawing a tripartite distinction between linguistic expressions, what they mean, and what they refer to. In effect, he is making the point that the concept of “meaning” is ambiguous: sometimes, in speaking about the meaning of a linguistic unit, one is speaking about its connotation or sense and sometimes about the reference or object it is referring to mentioning.”³⁰⁵

By holding that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorous’ have different senses there is no problem in explaining how one can acquire new knowledge by coming to know that Hesperus is Phosphorous – it is simply a case of coming to see the same referent under two different senses. This way of solving the problem differs from that of Russell. As Greg Fitch and Michael Nelson say,

the corresponding referent existed, and that we can usefully apply this notion to a description of natural language.” (Sainsbury 2005: 33, see also page 42). In this essay, the primary focus is on the second point Sainsbury here notes. Sainsbury furthermore makes the connection between the first point – McDowell's characterisation of senses – and the debate on modesty versus full-bloodedness in his defence of McDowell's “‘austere’ or ‘modest’ character[ization] of theories of meaning, or theories fit to ‘serve as’ theories of meaning” (Sainsbury 2005: 39), by saying that giving such a defence is tantamount to having defended *senses* as modest. As he summarises his own progression in the section on McDowell: “In short, I have been defending McDowell's conception of sense as ‘austere’.” (Sainsbury 2005: 41). A full discussion on how McDowell reads Frege's notion of sense would therefore take us into the intricacies of the discussion between him and Dummett.

³⁰⁴ Sainsbury 2005: 8. Sainsbury argues that, “Although Frege introduced this problem as one of the challenges posed by identity, the issue is not confined to statements of identity. ... Frege's puzzle is as much a puzzle, and his introduction of sense as much a solution, whenever we have coreferring names; it is not confined to statements of identity.” (Sainsbury 2005: 9.) The claim that Frege introduced the distinction in order to solve the problem of identity seems to be the standard view. For another example, see Edward N. Zalta's Stanford Encyclopaedia entry on Frege.

³⁰⁵ Stroll 2000: 26.

“there are, roughly speaking, two kinds of theories in the philosophy of language and many versions of these theories. ... There are the Fregean theories that employ some version of Frege's distinction between sense and reference and the Russellian theories that eschew this distinction.”³⁰⁶

Instead of solving the identity problem by postulating senses, Russell, as we know, distinguished between logically proper names, and definite descriptions; between names that pick out an object directly, and which have no other meaning than the object it denotes, and definite description, or ‘incomplete symbols’ that pick out an object through its specification and which are meaningless in isolation. The first type give rise to what has become known as ‘Russellian propositions’ – “propositions that are about a particular individual in virtue of having that individual as a direct *constituent*”³⁰⁷ – whereas propositions containing definite descriptions can be broken down, and analyzed in terms of the theory of description, as Russell’s famous example with ‘the present King of France’ illustrates.

However, whereas “Russell’s earliest account treat names as directly referential – they directly pick out an object without the intermediation of a description, or intension [i.e. sense] ... he later construes all grammatically proper names as abbreviations of descriptions.”³⁰⁸ And, as Frege wanted senses to be objective, he sometimes speaks as if senses were publically available descriptions, which has led to the grouping of both theories as ‘description theories’ in which the idea of singular propositions has been obscured.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁶ Fitch and Nelson 2008.

³⁰⁷ Fitch and Nelson 2008.

³⁰⁸ Stroll 2000: 28. On page 27, Stroll says that, “In what follows we shall use “intension” and “extension” as corresponding to the German expressions “*Sinn*” and “*Bedeutung*,” respectively.”

³⁰⁹ As Marga Reimer says, “According to description theories of proper names, a proper name, as used by a speaker, refers via the descriptive content associated (by the speaker) with that name. ... As descriptivists Frege (1892) and Russell (1919) acknowledge, the content in question may vary from one speaker to the next.” (Reimer 2008). This extension of the Theory of Descriptions, in which the notion of a singular thought ‘goes missing’, as McDowell says, is at centre of his criticism in “Evans’s Frege”, which I will come back to below. McDowell mentions a famous example from Frege, which he says, has invited labelling Frege as a ‘descriptionist’. In explaining how singular terms with the same *Bedeutung* can differ in sense, Frege illustrates the idea “by suggesting that Aristotle might figure, in some thoughts expressible by using the name ‘Aristotle’, as the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander (1892: 58). The words of Frege’s gloss here have the form that Russell discusses under the head of ‘definite descriptions’. And that may have helped to encourage a widespread assimilation of what Frege is aiming at, when he credits singular terms with *Sinn* as well as *Bedeutung*, to the neo-Russellian ‘descriptivism’ that I sketched earlier.” (McDowell 2005: 50).

However, in addition to the distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, which has made a number of commentators argue that Frege held that one *could* have sense without reference, there is also the fact that Frege seems, in a number of places, to argue explicitly *for* that view. In the early parts of “On Sense and Reference”, as R. M. Sainsbury argues, “Frege admits [the possibility of sense without a referent] in unequivocal terms”³¹⁰. In the relevant passage, Frege says that, “The expression ‘the least rapidly convergent series’ has a sense but demonstrably has no reference, since for every given convergent series, another convergent, but less rapidly convergent, series can be found.”³¹¹ Others, however, most notably Gareth Evans, have argued that Frege’s position was not so straightforward – that he equivocated in his view on the issue or, that in the passages where he speaks of senses without reference, it is merely as ‘mock thoughts’. As he argued in *The Varieties of Reference*,

“Why did he continue to adhere to a basically Russellian view of singular terms in all his serious theorizing, despite his willingness to contemplate empty singular terms with a sense? The answer I think, is that Frege found a convenient mat under which he could sweep the problem posed for his theory by assigning sense to empty singular terms, a mat we might label ‘Fiction’.”³¹²

So in passages where Frege appears to concede that “sentences containing an empty singular term may have a sense ... it does not *really* have a sense of the kind possessed by ordinary atomic sentences, because it does not function properly, it is only *as if* it functions properly.”³¹³ Adopting much the same interpretation as Evans of those passages where Frege seems to say otherwise, McDowell maintains that in spite of the general gloominess to the contrary, “Evans has given the outline of a perfectly Fregean account of some sorts of *de re* sense”³¹⁴.

³¹⁰ Sainsbury 2005: 16.

³¹¹ Sainsbury 2005: 16-17.

³¹² Evans 1982: 28.

³¹³ Evans 1982: 30.

³¹⁴ McDowell 1984/1998: 214. McDowell reiterates Evans’s claim in “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space”, saying that; the appearance that Frege admits singular thought having sense but lacking reference “can be at least partly undermined by noting, first, that Frege is prepared to count the serious utterances of a sentence containing an empty singular term as a lapse into fiction; and, second, that in at least one passage he treats fictional utterances as expressing “mock thoughts”.” (McDowell 1986/1998: 235).

In preparing the ground for Evans's thought, McDowell reverts to Russell's notion of singular propositions – thoughts that depend on the existence of the object they seek to pick out – and distinguishes it sharply from reference by description. Adherence to the distinction between genuinely referring expressions and definite descriptions plays an important role in McDowell's account of how Fregean senses can properly be seen to be object-dependent. As was noted above, McDowell believes this important Russellian idea can be open to a Fregean without doing harm to the distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, and as such, explain how we can have *de re* senses. Unfortunately, however, the distinction has been subject to a certain fudging, a blurring of the two types of referring that came from focusing on a superficial parallel between them rather than their differences. This led to an 'extended Theory of Descriptions', which lumped together ideas that should have been kept apart, and resulted in that the important notion of a genuinely referring expression was lost sight of. Later, in Kripke's important critique of 'description' theories, Russellian and Fregean theories were both treated as such theories. In the ensuing counter-revolution, Russell's notion of singular reference was rehabilitated, cleansed of some of its undesirable aspects, but the rehabilitation never reached Frege, which was still perceived to be caught in the old 'descriptivism' made implausible by Kripke. While McDowell seems to agree with the new, rehabilitated form of Russell's notion of singular reference, he denies that this notion is out of bounds to a Fregean. However, as McDowell argues, to see how we get to that position we need to "criticise a theoretical structure within which they [i.e. *de re* senses] are bound to seem incomprehensible."³¹⁵

III. *The distinction between de re and de dicto*

The framework, or theoretical structure, that McDowell seeks to undermine is exemplified in Tyler Burge's paper "Belief *De Re*", in the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* beliefs. Or, as McDowell says, in "a certain conception of the contrast between *de re* and *de dicto*."³¹⁶ McDowell draws up Burge's distinction in the following way:

³¹⁵ McDowell 1984/1998: 214.

³¹⁶ McDowell 1984/1998: 214-215

“At the level of logical form, the contrast is between *de dicto* attributions of, say, belief, which relate the believer to a “complete” (p. 343) or “completely expressed” (p. 345) proposition, and *de re* attributions, which relate the believer to a *res* and something less than a “complete” proposition. Underlying this semantic distinction is an “epistemic” distinction (pp. 345-6): this is between beliefs that are “fully conceptualized” (p. 345: *de dicto*), and beliefs “whose correct ascription places the believer in an appropriate nonconceptual contextual relation to objects the belief is about” (p. 346: *de re*).”³¹⁷

In essence, the contrast between *de re* and *de dicto* beliefs that McDowell attributes to Burge seems to be analogous to the difference drawn above between Russellian propositions, and the Fregean distinction between *Sinn* und *Bedeutung* – underscored, as he says, by a semantic and an epistemic division of that distinction. Between, on the one hand, fine-grained Fregean Thoughts (composed of senses) capable of dealing with identity problems etc., through being completely expressed (*de dicto* thoughts or utterances, as McDowell says), and Russellian propositions, i.e. incompletely expressed propositions, which has objects as its constituents, and as such needs the presence of that object to be a complete propositions (*de re* thoughts or utterances).³¹⁸

In addition to this distinction, McDowell argues that Burge holds a “fundamental intuition”, viz. that, “if a propositional attitude (or utterance) is essentially *de re*, that is in virtue of the fact that a context involving the *res* itself enters into determining how the attitude (or utterance) can be correctly described.”³¹⁹ For Burge, this is supposed to show the incompatibility between *de re* thoughts and Fregean sense, but McDowell asks rhetorically: “why should the essentially *de re*, conceived in conformity with this intuition, be deemed inaccessible to Frege?”³²⁰ The question is supposed to invite the thought that the ‘essentially *de re*’ is only out of bounds for Frege due to Burge’s conception of the contrast between *de re* and *de dicto* though. That Burge’s otherwise correct intuition is held captive in a misguided framework; an infelicitous distinction between *de re* and *de dicto*, which it is the objective of “De Re Senses” to expose and

³¹⁷ McDowell 1984/1998: 215.

³¹⁸ That the distinction McDowell here attributes to Burge is analogous to the one we considered above, seems clear when McDowell adds in the ensuing to this passage that it would be a mere ‘terminological question’ whether one chose to label the incompletely expressed propositions “Russellian propositions”, which, as he says “are not “completely expressed” but contain objects as constituents along with “expressed” items that are less than “complete” propositions.” This, as he goes on to say, “brings out neatly why Fregean theory cannot countenance the essentially *de re*” (McDowell 1984/1998: 215).

³¹⁹ McDowell 1984/1998: 215.

³²⁰ McDowell 1984/1998: 216.

undermine. Once the framework falls, we may see how a Fregean thought can be *de re* while at the same time respecting Burge's intuition.

We can see the contours of an alternative account of the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* by closely observing passages in *Logical Investigations* in which Frege emphasises the role of the *context* in which the utterance is made for the 'complete expression' of a thought – "how the knowledge of certain conditions accompanying the utterance ... is needed for us to grasp the thought correctly"³²¹, as he says. Intuitively, however, these passages may seem like good examples to the contrary of what McDowell hopes to prove. Invoking the notion of a 'context' as necessary for the complete expression of a thought seems merely to reiterate the requirement that we, as with Russellian propositions, must be related to, an object, in order to express a proposition in which that object features, and it does not seem to break the spell of the underlying framework captivating Burge at all. However, McDowell argues that such a reading comes from insensitivity to what Frege is actually saying in these passages. Although Frege,

"is writing of thoughts that are not completely expressed by words abstracted from context of utterances, ... he is precisely *not* conceding that the thoughts are not completely expressed, *simpliciter*. So where Burge speaks of *res*-involving context partly determining the shape of a correct *de re* attribution, it is not clear why this cannot be transposed, in the light of this passage from Frege, into a conception of how such a context contributes to the expression of a fully expressible but nevertheless *de re* thought."³²²

It has been argued that Frege is using the notion of 'thoughts', in the passages which McDowell relies on, in an unorthodox sense – an idea which is encouraged by Frege

³²¹ *Logical Investigations*, quoted at McDowell 216. In full, and as McDowell gives them, the passages from Frege goes: "If a time indication is conveyed by the present tense one must know when the sentence was uttered in order to grasp the thought correctly. Therefore the time of utterance is part of the expression of the thought." And, as McDowell says, "Again, in connection with "yesterday" and "today", and "here" and "there", [Frege] writes: "In all such cases the mere wording, as it can be preserved in writing, is not the complete expression of the thought; the knowledge of certain conditions accompanying the utterance, which are used as means of expressing the thought, is needed for us to grasp the thought correctly.""

³²² McDowell 1984/1998: 216. McDowell is here saying that although these thoughts are not completely expressed in abstraction from a context, they are not thereby *incomplete expressions*, i.e. they do not need to be supplemented by an object in order to be completed. But if they do not need an *object* to be completed but a context, why cannot the context of utterance play the role of the *res*? This would make the thought *de re* in McDowell's peculiar sense, a move which seems compatible with the Fregean distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*.

allowing that, “if one utters a sentence containing “yesterday” one can express the same thought as one could have expressed on the day before by uttering a sentence containing “today”³²³ – in which the thought referred to “would be, not a Fregean thought, but a Russellian proposition, containing the day in question as a constituent”³²⁴. But McDowell charges that attributing such a reading to Frege would simply undermine the fundamental point of Frege’s notion of sense. It has also been claimed that Frege might inadvertently have slipped in his use of ‘thoughts’, but against this claim McDowell holds up Evans’s more charitable suggestion that we read ‘thoughts’ in these passages as “dynamic thoughts” – thoughts, which, as in the previous example, require that we keep track of time or place, and as such “preserve their identity through the necessary changes in how they might be expressed.”³²⁵ However, these ‘dynamic thoughts’ would not be Russellian propositions (in that they would not contain the day in question as an object), and the idea of dynamic thoughts do not therefore serve to *support* Burge’s claim that *de re* thoughts are out of reach for a Fregean wishing to adhere to the *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* distinction. On the contrary, McDowell believes that nothing of what has been noted so far shows that a Fregean wishing to respect the *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* distinction is barred from helping himself to *de re* thoughts, and he upholds that it seems unintelligible “why Burge assumes ... that contextual factors must be extraneous to the expressive capacities of context-sensitive utterances.”³²⁶ In other words: why the *res* of Burge’s intuition discussed above must necessarily be *objects*, constituents of thought, as in Russellian propositions, and why they cannot just as well be Fregean contexts. “If we had only the linguistic expression of thought to consider”³²⁷, McDowell claims, it would make Burge’s approach mysterious. However, he says, we may glimpse an answer to Burge’s delusion from the “epistemic basis” laying behind Burge’s arguments. As he quotes Burge as saying:

“The rough epistemic analogue of the linguistic notion of what is expressed by a semantically significant expression is the notion of a concept. Traditionally speaking, concepts are a person’s means of

³²³ McDowell 1984/1998: 216.

³²⁴ McDowell 1984/1998: 217.

³²⁵ McDowell 1984/1998: 217.

³²⁶ McDowell 1984/1998: 217.

³²⁷ McDowell 1984/1998: 217.

representing objects in thought. ... From a semantical viewpoint, a *de dicto* belief is a belief in which the believer is related only to a completely expressed proposition (*dictum*). *The epistemic analogue is a belief that is fully conceptualized*. That is, a correct ascription of the *de dicto* belief identifies it purely by reference to a “content” all of whose semantically relevant components characterize elements in the believer’s conceptual repertoire.”³²⁸

This passage brings us to the heart of what McDowell takes to be flawed with the framework Burge operates under. For in maintaining, as Burge does, that, epistemologically understood, ‘concepts are *means* of representing objects in thought’, we see the outline of why Burge thinks that Frege is excluded from embracing *de re* thoughts. According to McDowell, the consequences of viewing concepts as means, or ‘vehicles’ of representation as he says later³²⁹, is that,

“a belief’s being fully conceptualized can mean only that it has a fully propositional content exhausted by some collection of thought *symbols*; and it would follow that there is no room for contextual factors to contribute to determining how such a belief may be correctly ascribed.”³³⁰

This forges an obligatory *separation* between content and context, in that for something to contribute to the propositional content of a thought it would need to be a *symbol*, or a *means* of representation – which a context is patently not. Context is therefore *a priori* barred from contributing to the content of thought in virtue of not possessing the right form. But McDowell argues that this view on the relation between concepts and context is due to a,

“patent slide; from concepts as parts or aspects of the *content* of a representational state, such as a belief, to concepts as *means* of representation. In the former sense (which is non-Fregean, but for present purposes only harmlessly so³³¹), concepts would indeed be analogous to *what is expressed by words*, as

³²⁸ McDowell 1984/1998: 218.

³²⁹ See McDowell 1984/1998: 219.

³³⁰ McDowell 1984/1998: 218. McDowell does not expound on this conclusion, but it seems plausible to think that he would deny that contexts could be ‘thought symbols’, as he seems to think of symbols as words. See below in text.

³³¹ This harmlessly non-Fregean way in which concepts can be seen as ‘what is expressed by words’ will be important later when we (very briefly) touch upon McDowell’s reading of Fregean senses – the final element that connects his novel conception of *de re* with a notion of ‘sense’ into a complete explanation of how there can be *de re* senses. See below in text.

Burge says. In the latter sense, they would be analogous to *what does the expressing*: to the words themselves.”³³²

Both these views seem, as McDowell points out, to be found in Burge’s passage from above. In attributing the first sense of concept to Burge, McDowell seems to have in mind the sentence, where Burge says that, “The rough epistemic analogue of the linguistic notion of *what is expressed* by a semantically significant expression is the notion of a concept.” The second attribution; that concepts are the *means* of expression, is, as we have seen, stated straightforwardly in the ensuing line.³³³ Once we realize this conflation in Burge’s thinking, as McDowell says,

“the direction of argument can reverse. It is not that an independently compulsory division between content and context undermines Frege’s wish to make a different use of the concept of expression, but rather the evident coherence of Frege’s remarks, with the same plausible equation between “conceptual content” and what can be “completely expressed”, show that Burge’s picture of the relation between context and content is unwarranted.”³³⁴

After having painstakingly extracted what McDowell takes to be flawed with the standard conception of what it is for a thought to be *de re*, an opening seems to emerge as to how *context* can play the role of the *res* in Burge’s intuition – an intuition McDowell claimed was applicable to a Fregean theory respecting the distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. What Burge’s ‘patent slide’ showed us, was a way of making it clear that concepts need not be symbols or ‘vehicles’ of representation in order to contribute to the conceptual content of a thought. In other words: that there is a way of thinking of *de re* thoughts which allows *context* to contribute to the “plausible equation between “conceptual content” and what can be “completely expressed””³³⁵ without being a *means* of representation. But what notion of “object-directed” thought are we here seeing the contours of?

³³² McDowell 1984/1998: 218.

³³³ McDowell’s interpretation of Burge seems to place a lot of weight on a single sentence, which may not even be all that clear. But again, my aim is not to criticise McDowell’s exegesis, but to understand McDowell’s suggestion that we can have *de re* senses.

³³⁴ McDowell 1984/1998: 218.

³³⁵ McDowell 1984/1998: 218.

IV. *Defending Fregean singular propositions*

In developing a positive account on how there can be Fregean *de re* senses in a recent paper called “Evans’s Frege” McDowell starts with Russell. On what seems to be a fairly uncontroversial reading of Russell, McDowell notes that, by Russell’s lights, there is a difference in logical form between definite descriptions – forms of the kind ‘The F is G’, as he says – and “genuinely referring expressions – ‘logically proper names’”³³⁶, whose form is captured by the form “‘a is G’ (where ‘a’ marks a place for a logically proper name).”³³⁷ Whereas thoughts expressed by uttering sentences containing definite descriptions does not rely on the existence of the object in question, “sentences with logically proper names in subject position express thoughts (or propositions) whose availability to thought [does] depend on the existence of the objects referred to by the logically proper names.”³³⁸ Admittedly, though, there is a ‘superficial parallel’ between the two forms, which amounts to this: if there *is* an object that uniquely satisfies a definite description, as McDowell says, then that object also feature as the object picked out by a logical proper name. As such,

“Both [logical forms] determine a certain object as what the thought that is being expressed concerns, in the sense that the truth or falsity of the thought depends on how it is with that object. Indeed, we could use that formulation to define a certain conception of singular reference.”³³⁹

However, the parallel is no more than superficial as it ‘masks’, as McDowell says, that, “Where absence of a suitable object would require us to find no thought expressed if we assimilated the two logical forms, the Theory of Descriptions finds a thought that is no worse than false.”³⁴⁰ But the thought then really comes to this: that there *is* no unifying feature which groups the two ways of referring under one heading, or as McDowell says: “If we focus on this difference, we shall not be inclined to make much of the conception of singular reference that group definite descriptions – though only those that single out objects – and logically proper names together.”³⁴¹

³³⁶ McDowell 2005: 42.

³³⁷ McDowell 2005: 42-43.

³³⁸ McDowell 2005: 42.

³³⁹ McDowell 2005: 43.

³⁴⁰ McDowell 2005: 43.

³⁴¹ McDowell 2005: 43.

Nevertheless, the distinction between genuinely referring terms and definite descriptions has been subject to a certain fudging, or blurring, which comes precisely from an undue focusing on the ‘superficial parallel’ between the two forms of referring rather than a strict observance of their differences. We are gulled into the haze of an extended Theory of Descriptions by the natural thought that in cases where we cannot be certain of the existence of the object of our thought “one can direct thoughts at objects only in the way the Theory of Descriptions provide for”,³⁴² – which leaves it is a short step to argue that the Theory of Descriptions extends beyond its proper domain and branches into the province of singular propositions. It seems that even when we cannot verify the existence of the object we are facing, which, if we had, would allow us to form a singular proposition, the thought is nevertheless available to be expressed by treating the object as a “mere” definite description.³⁴³ This extension of the domain of the Theory of Descriptions may lead one to treat object-directed thought as a conjunct phenomena; that one’s thought of a certain object can be treated as an ‘extended description’, meaning that the thought *either* contains a singular referring expression, *or*, in the case that the object does not exist, that it contains a definite description.

It would be interesting in this regard – although McDowell does not do so himself – to point to an analogy between McDowell’s attempt to draw up a genuine distinction between these two ways of referring and his criticism of the idea of a ‘common kind’ of mental state in perception: his criticism of the idea that there is a state that is common in both veridical seeing and hallucinating, grouping them together as perceptual phenomena – in short, McDowell’s disjunctivism.³⁴⁴ For it seems that by extending the Theory of Descriptions we are in reality blurring or fudging what is a disjunction of two phenomena; we are saying that the thought of an object ‘a’ is either a thought expressing

³⁴² McDowell 2005: 43.

³⁴³ Or, as McDowell says: “The theory’s characteristic form comes to figure also in Russell’s account of the thoughts that speakers have in mind when they utter sentences containing what would ordinarily be regarded as singular referring expressions, if the objects in question are outside the range of the speakers’ acquaintances, on Russell’s restricted conception of acquaintances.” (McDowell 2005: 44).

³⁴⁴ Tim Crane describes disjunctivism as the rejection of the idea that “what *makes* it true that these two experiences are describable in this way [in his example: as the experience of a snow-covered churchyard] is the presence of the same fundamental kind of mental state in the case of perception and hallucination. [According to disjunctivism,] In the case of the perception, what makes it true that the description applies is that the experience is a perception of the churchyard; in the hallucinatory case, what makes it true that the description applies is that the experience is a hallucination of the churchyard.” (Crane 2008).

a definite description – in the case the object does not exist – or it is a thought expressing a singular proposition – in the case the object does exist. But this seems to be parallel to saying that my perception is either a case of a hallucination – in the case there is no object that corresponds to what I see – or it is a case of veridical seeing – in the case there is an object that I see. Although McDowell does not himself point to this similarity, I believe it would not be wholly wrong to characterize what McDowell is here doing as emphasising, or making us see a ‘semantic disjunctivism’, or, if the term is preferred, a ‘referential disjunctivism’.³⁴⁵

The main point of upholding a distinction between genuine referring and referring by description is to avoid lapsing into a descriptivism that is vulnerable to Kripke’s criticism of those theories.³⁴⁶ And in “Evans’s Frege” McDowell maintains that, “it remains the case that the extended Theory of Descriptions” – i.e. the theory of descriptions extended beyond its borders so as to include objects that *could* have featured in logical proper names had one been certain of their existence – “does not capture Russell’s view of genuinely subject-predicate form.”³⁴⁷ It is nevertheless understandable, he says, that

“this should have tended to be forgotten, given how Russell’s treatment restricts, almost to the vanishing point, our repertoire of the kind of thoughts we can express with the help of logically proper names. ... [However,] In this general [or extended] ‘descriptivism’, what is plausible to identify as Russell’s own conception of singular reference goes missing.”³⁴⁸

This passage seems to place the blame on those following Russell, and on their failure to distinguish between genuinely referring terms and definite descriptions in Russell’s thinking, and it is therefore interesting to note that McDowell, in an earlier essay, goes far in putting the blame for this distortion on Russell himself. In the opening

³⁴⁵ The closest McDowell seems to come, is when he, in the opening phase of “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space” asks rhetorically: “Why should we find it intolerable to postulate the sort of illusion that Russell disallows? Why not say that some sentences (or utterances) of a given range express singular propositions, whereas others present the illusory apparatus of doing so (to those in the know) – rather than, with Russell, devising a kind of non-singular proposition to be associated with all alike?” (McDowell 1986/1998: 229).

³⁴⁶ Sainsbury mentions four objections raised by Kripke, of which the first is that proper names are rigid designators in that they pick out a single object in all possible worlds. This makes them differ in modal profile to definite descriptions, “so that the former cannot be examples of the latter, and cannot have a meaning or sense given by the latter.” (Sainsbury 2005: 28).

³⁴⁷ McDowell 2005: 46.

³⁴⁸ McDowell 2005: 46.

phase of “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space”, the distinction between the logical form of genuinely referring terms and definite descriptions is set out in the same way as almost twenty years later: between on the one hand, “logically proper names [that] combine with predicates to express propositions that would not be available to be expressed at all if the objects referred to did not exist”³⁴⁹, and definite descriptions that are meaningful, whether or not the object they refer to exists. In this early paper McDowell characterises the idea of singular propositions as intending to make room for a “distinctive kind of configuration in psychological reality”³⁵⁰, allowing us to entertain a certain type of thoughts in which we stand in direct contact with the object of our thought. According to McDowell, “It seems clear that Russell’s conception of singular (object-dependent) propositions is intended in part as a contribution to psychology.”³⁵¹ However, as McDowell goes on to say, “Russell takes this psychological application of the idea to be possible only under a severe restriction on its scope”³⁵², and in “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space” it is *this* – Russell’s restriction on what counts as an object of acquaintance – that inhibits us from seeing the liberating potential of singular propositions and how they can be made to cohere with a Fregean system, and not necessarily the blurring of the distinction between genuinely referring terms and descriptions.

The two points are nevertheless related; as we have just seen, McDowell concedes that Russell’s restriction makes logical proper names a curious notion, motivating an extension of the Theory of Descriptions. But rather than extending the Theory of Descriptions, and thereby blurring the distinction, we should look for a way to *liberalize* Russell’s view on what counts as an object suitable for a singular proposition. As McDowell says, “I believe a version of Russell’s idea can help with some venerable philosophical difficulties about the relation between thought and reality; but first we must see how its direct psychological application can be detached from Russell’s restriction.”³⁵³ A restriction which amounts to

³⁴⁹ McDowell 1986/1998: 228.

³⁵⁰ McDowell 1986/1998: 228.

³⁵¹ McDowell 1986/1998: 228.

³⁵² McDowell 1986/1998: 228.

³⁵³ McDowell 1986/1998: 229.

“refusing to accept that there can be an illusion of understanding an apparently singular sentence (or utterance), involving the illusion of entertaining a singular proposition expressed by it, when, since there is no suitably related object, there is no such proposition to be available to be entertained.”³⁵⁴

To see how Russell’s restriction inhibits the full potential of an interesting and forceful conception of singular propositions, that ‘may help with some venerable philosophical difficulties’, we can note the following line of thought. Refusing to accept that there can be illusions in entertaining singular propositions means – as we saw above – that whenever the possibility of such an illusions arise, “the apparatus of the Theory of Descriptions is brought to bear, in order to equip sentences (or utterances) of the range with non-singular propositions that they can be understood to express whether or not there is a suitably related object.”³⁵⁵ In other words: whenever we entertain thoughts containing objects whose existence we cannot place beyond all doubt, the thought we thereby entertain is ‘extended’ to a thought containing a definite description. Now, a central element of Russell’s theory is that the only objects of which we can be certain of their existence – and thereby certain that we are not facing an illusion – are objects we can be acquainted with. However, as Russell held a very strict view on what counted as an instance of acquaintance, there were in fact very few things, under this conception, with which we could be said to be acquainted, and thereby very little that could be said to enter into genuinely referring thoughts. As McDowell says,

“On his official account of acquaintance, one is acquainted only with things that figure in one’s immediate consciousness, conceived in a rather Cartesian way: bits of the sensory given, bits of what is given with similar immediacy in recollection, and (as long as Russell believes in it) one’s own self.”³⁵⁶

So, once we move outside the sphere of what goes on in our immediate consciousness we can therefore no longer be said to be acquainted with the objects of our thoughts, and the threat of an illusion is introduced, thereby invoking the extended Theory of Descriptions. But this, as we have seen, would be to bring in the Theory of Description too soon, and to enlarge it in an inappropriate way.

³⁵⁴ McDowell 1986/1998: 229.

³⁵⁵ McDowell 1986/1998: 229.

³⁵⁶ McDowell 2005: 43.

However, extending the Theory of Descriptions is not the only option available – as we have seen, it would in fact be to discard Russell’s important insight of the possibility of entertaining singular propositions – and in the wake of Kripke’s influential attack,

“much theorising about singular thought and its expression came to focus on certain contextual relations, typically of a causal character, in which objects can stand to episodes of thought and speech. In a newly dominant conception of how singular reference works, directing thoughts at objects by exploiting such relations replaced targeting thoughts on objects as those that conform to specifications.”³⁵⁷

This reaction, as McDowell says, comes to a rediscovery of some of the neglected parts of Russell’s theory, in which the notion of acquaintance is liberated from its inhibiting restriction. As such, it coincides with McDowell’s pronounced aim of ‘detaching’ Russell’s notion of singular reference from the restriction he submits it to – an aim that in fact seems to be a necessary step in McDowell’s further objective of providing a way of explaining how Fregean senses can be object-dependent.³⁵⁸ According to McDowell, although “Russell allows as objects of perceptual acquaintance only features of sense-data ... we can extract the notion of acquaintance from the epistemological framework, and apply it to at least some perceptual relations between minds and ordinary objects.”³⁵⁹ The move has the effect of undermining Russell’s restriction that only objects with which we are acquainted can occupy an epistemically privileged position making singular propositions immune to illusion. Although this shift in the scope of singular reference plays a central role in his historical reconstruction, McDowell does not really argue for this, but simply dismisses Russell’s sense-datum theory as implausible, arguing that “There is no independent justification, from general epistemology, for refusing to allow that there can be illusions of entertaining singular propositions.”³⁶⁰

³⁵⁷ McDowell 2005: 51.

³⁵⁸ A Russellian singular thought in which we need to be acquainted with the object of our thought would not introduce the kind of identity problems that motivate the Fregean distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*.

³⁵⁹ McDowell 1986/1998: 231.

³⁶⁰ McDowell 1986/1998: 232. This seems to be a point where exegesis turns into use. As we saw above, (in the first quote in my introduction) McDowell speaks of the force of ‘quasi-Russellian’ propositions to solve the problem of how subjectivity and the realm of ordinary things are related, which seems to indicate that he is well aware that he is exceeding Russell’s own conception in introducing ‘ordinary objects of perception’ as objects with which we can be acquainted.

Nevertheless, although we can liberalize Russell's thought on singular propositions such that it can be brought into contact with its modern notational variant – thereby arguably circumvent Kripke's criticism – the line back to Russell, or so McDowell claims, is generally overlooked by its new proponents. Moreover, the idea is taken to be in conflict with Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, as Frege is seen as a representative of the old descriptivism which is undermined by Kripke's critique, and it is therefore maintained that Frege's idea that *Sinn* determines *Bedeutung* “at most partly determine which objects thoughts concern, needing extraneous help in singling out objects from causal relations between thinkers and objects, now conceived as obtaining outside the sphere of a subject's rationality.”³⁶¹ On the other hand, McDowell and Evans argue that the rediscovery of Russell's conception of singular propositions is compatible with Frege's distinction. As McDowell says, “The main interest of Evans's exploitation of Frege lies in its rejecting this picture”³⁶² – a picture, which prevents that insight.

Seeing how this idea is supposed to be incompatible with the Fregean framework – or alternatively, how it, on McDowell and Evans's account, can be made to fit – takes us once more back to the difference between Frege and Russell. Whereas “Russell formulates his conception of genuinely subject-predicate form by speaking of propositions in which objects themselves figure as constituents”³⁶³, which, as we saw, would have the consequence that “there could not be two such propositions in which the same property is attributed to the same object”³⁶⁴, Frege explained how we could nevertheless have *two* such thoughts through the introduction of sense. As McDowell notes, “Frege's aim is to provide for thoughts about objects to be individuated more finely than by the objects they are about.”³⁶⁵ Although this is normally taken to prove that Frege could not hold that thoughts are *de re*, or object-dependent McDowell sees it differently, and argues that, “That formulation [i.e. that thoughts are to be individuated more finely than the objects they are about] uses a neutral notion *of a thought's being about an object*. Nothing”, as he goes on to say, “prevents its being applied to thoughts that are about objects in the ‘Russellian’ sense that they depend on the objects for their

³⁶¹ McDowell 2005: 51.

³⁶² McDowell 2005: 52.

³⁶³ McDowell 2005: 52.

³⁶⁴ McDowell 2005: 52.

³⁶⁵ McDowell 2005: 52.

existence.”³⁶⁶ So, on McDowell’s account, at the very least, Frege’s says nothing that *exclude* us from seeing thoughts as dependent on the existence of the object they are about.

McDowell concedes that it may be somewhat hard to see the possibility he here envisages. That “Within Russell’s restricted range, it is hard to see how there could be pairs of cases like those Frege exploits to argue that we need a finer individuation of thought”³⁶⁷, i.e. cases of identity, where the same object is attributed the same property. However, “once Russell’s restriction is lifted ... as in the conception of reference that has supplanted ‘descriptivism’ as the dominant position, it becomes clearer that object-dependence in thought is not, of itself alien to the Fregean framework.”³⁶⁸ McDowell suggests the view that,

“There is nothing to prevent us from contemplating rational subjects who combine beliefs and disbeliefs in whose content the same predication is made of the same object – the sort of combination that recommended the Fregean apparatus – even though the contents that Fregean considerations require us to differentiate are contents whose being thinkable at all *require the existence of the object*.”³⁶⁹

And as he rounds off the passage by claiming, in a phrase that summarises his suggestion of how Fregean senses may be *de re*:

“A proposition can be object-dependent even though its identity is determined not by the *Bedeutung* but by the *Sinn* of a singular term used in giving expression to it.”³⁷⁰

Although it takes us into McDowell’s discussion of sense – which I have tried to keep out of the paper – the idea of how a proposition can be object-dependent and at the same time determined by the *Sinn* of a singular proposition, seems, without a brief look at his notion of sense, rather mysterious. So under the pretext of facilitating an understanding of how a context is supposed to be able to act as the *res*, I’ll briefly go beyond the self-set scope of the paper.

³⁶⁶ McDowell 2005: 52, my emphasis.

³⁶⁷ McDowell 2005: 52.

³⁶⁸ McDowell 2005: 52.

³⁶⁹ McDowell 2005: 52-53 (my emphasis).

³⁷⁰ McDowell 2005: 53.

In “On the Sense and Reference of a Proper Name”, McDowell notes a distinction in how to understand ‘the reference of x’ – knowledge which was a requirement for being acquainted with an object, and hence, a requirement for entertaining a singular proposition. As McDowell says,

“A phrase of the form “the reference of x” can be understood as equivalent to the corresponding phrase of the form “what x refers to”, either (i) in the sense in which “what” amounts to “that which” (which yields the official Fregean use of “*Bedeutung*”) or (ii) in the sense in which “what” is an interrogative pronoun. In this second sense, “what x refers to” gives the form of an indirect question, something suitable to follow “know” where knowledge of truths is what is meant. Knowledge of the *reference* of a name, in this second (non-Fregean) sense, could reasonably be held to be knowledge that, in the context of further knowledge not itself involving the name, would suffice for understanding utterances containing the name – that is, precisely, knowledge of its *sense*.”³⁷¹

And as McDowell goes on to say,

“The possibility of equating a distinction between sense and (Fregean) reference with a distinction between (non-Fregean) reference and referent may, for those who are at home in the latter idiom, make it easier to see how crediting names with senses ... is not necessarily crediting them with anything like connotation or descriptive meaning.”³⁷²

But this gives us just what we needed, for if we adopt the second understanding McDowell here sketches, we have a way in which knowledge of ‘the reference of x’ – although in a non-Fregean manner – does not require the acquaintance of the *object* to which x refers, but knowledge of its *sense*. In other words, that we may have knowledge of ‘the reference of x’ (in a non-Fregean manner) if we know the sense of x (in a Fregean manner), as he says in the last quote here given. But this allows that not just *objects* but senses may be the *res* of a *de re* thought, which is what McDowell says above in saying that: “A proposition can be object-dependent even though its identity is determined not by the *Bedeutung* but by the *Sinn* of a singular term used in giving expression to it.” And as McDowell argues, quoting Frege from *Logical Inquiries*, the complete expression of a thought may depend on the context in which it is uttered, meaning that the *context*

³⁷¹ McDowell 1977/1998: 175.

³⁷² McDowell 1977/1998: 175-176.

would be instrumental in providing the ‘knowledge of x’ in the second sense mentioned – that the context would be the *res*, making the thought a *de re* or ‘object-dependent’ thought.

V. Conclusion

So what have we seen so far? I started by saying that we, in McDowell’s semantic works, seem to find a semantic solution to the generic problem of how the mind is related to the world. As McDowell ends “Evans’s Frege” by saying,

“Evans’s Frege enables a synthesis between acknowledging that contextual relations between subjects and objects matter for determining the contents of thoughts, on the one hand, and giving full weight to the idea that thinking is an exercise of rationality, on the other. This can be seen as a substantial contribution to a project that goes back at least to Kant, and that is beset with difficulties in the intellectual environment of modern philosophy: integrating our rational powers with our natural situatedness in the world.”³⁷³

As McDowell is here saying, Evans’s Frege presents a substantial contribution to the problem of how to integrate mind in world, which is *precisely* the problem that occupies him in *Mind and World* – although McDowell in that work probes the problem from its epistemological formulation: how can experience justify beliefs? The semantic works queries the generic problem in a semantical form: how can there be *de re* senses?

The first step in his attempt to explain how there *can* be *de re* senses, and hence, that there is no problem in explaining the relation between mind and world once we see things straight, is to undermine a framework that inhibits the idea of *de re* senses in the first place. This framework comes out in Burge’s view of the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* thoughts, which hinges on the misconception that the *res* of a *de re* thought *must* be an object of thought in the Russellian sense: that the *res* must be of the form that it can enter as a constituent of a proposition. However, according to McDowell, this misconception is due to a slide in Burge’s thinking between seeing concepts, as McDowell puts it, as ‘*what is expressed by words*’, to seeing them as means or vehicles of representation. In the first sense, they are constituents of Fregean Thoughts³⁷⁴; in the

³⁷³ McDowell 2005: 65.

³⁷⁴ More specifically, McDowell argues that on the latter sense, which is “non-Fregean, but for present purposes only harmlessly so”, concepts are analogous to ‘what is expressed by words’. Cf. note ... But as

second, concepts are building blocks of Russellian propositions. Pointing to this slide in Burge's thinking is supposed to undermine the framework that the *res* of a *de re* thought – or alternatively, the 'object' of an object-dependent thought – must be understood as a constituent of a proposition; that it, on the contrary, may be a *sense* partaking in the constitution of a Fregean Thought. As such, McDowell's solution to the question of how there can be *de re* senses is visible in "De Re Senses", although the paper is mainly directed to undermining the standard conception of what it is for a thought to be *de re*.

In his more constructive attempt of replacing or expanding the notion of *de re*, presented in "Evans's Frege", McDowell seeks to recover Russell's notion of singular reference (object-dependent reference), and show that it is open to a Fregean by arguing that although *Sinn* is introduced to allow thoughts to individuate more finely than the objects they are about, it does not mean that the thoughts are thereby complete or independent of the 'objects' they are about. In some cases, as Frege concedes, a context is necessary in order to complete a thought, meaning that the thought is *dependent* upon the context, turning the thought into a *de re* thought in the sense that the *context* plays the role of the '*res*' needed to complete the thought. As such, we have a way in which there can be *de re* senses.

However, McDowell's work is not meant to prove that we *must* conceive Fregean senses this way, only that there is nothing that prevents us from allowing senses to be *de re*; that such an interpretation is not in conflict with the Fregean distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. So although McDowell may here be said to give a compelling case of how singular propositions *may* be employed in a framework of Fregean senses, it is not an argument that *forces* such a reading as the only correct. Nor is it clear that Frege himself saw matters this way, and McDowell's approach, especially his exposition in "Evans's Frege", seems to be hedged with qualifications which indicates that McDowell would be happy to argue for a weaker claim: that fitting singular thought in Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* is an option open to a *Fregean*. As he says in a footnote,

we have just seen, McDowell believes that this non-Fregean distinction between *content* and *means of expression* can be expressed in terms of the Fregean distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*.

“the present point is just that nothing in the idea of ways of thinking of objects, conceived as individuated on Fregean principles, *excludes* their being object dependent.”³⁷⁵

A full account of Fregean *de re* senses would have to address what Frege means by ‘sense’ – an issue that would open the floodgates to the heated, and long-standing debate between McDowell and Michael Dummett over modest versus full-blooded theories of meaning, and it is an issue that would involve us in a lot more work than it would be possible to deal with here. The present has only been an attempt at making it plausible to see how there *can* be *de re* senses. If there *is* such a possibility, we have a semantic ‘solution’ to the generic problem of how mind can be related to the world. How, as we saw in essay I, and again in essay II, we may undermine a picture of the mind common to both coherentism and ‘Givenism’ – which argues that the realm of nature, conceived as the realm of law, and the space of reasons, are of different kinds, thereby generating the problem of mind’s relation to the world³⁷⁶ – by arguing that we *can* conceive of *de re* senses. As McDowell ends “Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space” by saying,

“The point of the conception of singular thought that I have been recommending is that it treats the Cartesian fear of loss [of the world] in a different, and fully satisfying way: not by trying to bridge a gulf between intentionality and objects, nor by a cavalier refusal to worry about the problem, while leaving what poses it undisturbed, but by fundamentally undermining the picture of mind that generates the Cartesian divide.”³⁷⁷

³⁷⁵ McDowell 2005: 53, footnote 18.

³⁷⁶ As we saw in essay I (page 28), both coherentism and ‘Givenism’ “holds that the contrast that poses our difficulties, the contrast of logical spaces, is genuine.” That, “The structure of the space of reasons stubbornly resists being appropriated within a naturalism that conceives nature as the realm of law.” (McDowell 1996: 73).

³⁷⁷ McDowell 1986/1998: 259.

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